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100 HOTTEST NEW GAMES

TESTED

TITANFALL 2

How Respawn's shooter blew us away

SECRETS REVEALED

RESIDENT EVIL VII

What horrors did you miss?

HANDS-ON WITH LINK'S STUNNING RETURN

ZELDA REBORN

FIRST PS4 NEO INFO

GOD OF WAR • DEAD RISING 4 • GEARS OF WAR 4 • WATCH DOGS 2

NEW SCREENS, NEW INFO, TOTAL ACCESS TO THE BIGGEST NEW GAMES

PROJECT SCORPIO DETAILS

ALSO INSIDE

DEATH STRANDING • HORIZON: ZERO DAWN • TEKKEN 7 • BATTLEFIELD 1 • RECORE
FORZA HORIZON 3 • DISHONORED 2 • MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA • FIFA 17 • PES 2017
THE LAST GUARDIAN • DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED • FOR HONOR • DAYS GONE • PREY
GHOST RECON: WILDLANDS • SCALEBOUND • POKÉMON GO • SEA OF THIEVES

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Where will we find the time? So many games are packed into this issue and even though we've highlighted 100 of them, there could have been more. But where will we find the time? If you're a single-console stalwart then that at least narrows things down a little, as PlayStation, Xbox and Wii U have some fine additions, expansions and unlikely sequels to enjoy in the coming months. If you're a PC gamer then you're probably the happiest and most time-poor of them all, with so many recent game announcements confirming what we have believed; PC gaming is back in a big way.

But I think what stands out as you look through the 100 Hottest New Games that we've selected this issue, is that they appear to be leaning on the side of fun. The dark, introspective gaming experiences that began to dominate the last generation and began this one were fascinating (and I do hope for more), but it's good to see so many developers embracing what gaming has always been about: escapism and having fun.

As I look through this list I see very few ordeals or possibilities for heartbreak. What I see is hours upon hours of inventive, creative, exhilarating and engaging entertainment. I see adventures on land, on the sea and in space all vying for my attention. The only pitfall I can see is where I will find the time. It's a nice problem to have.

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR

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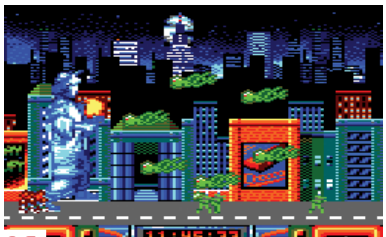

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THE 100 HOTTEST NEW GAMES

From God Of War to Gears Of War 4, Forza Horizon 3 to Horizon: Zero Dawn, we run down the most exciting new titles coming to your favourite systems

Discuss

NEWS
INDUSTRY GOSSIP
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YOUR VIEWS

GENERATION GAMES

Xbox battles back

→ Microsoft has unveiled the most powerful console ever, a huge statement of intent as it attempts to claw back to market supremacy. Its risky business, but is it a gamble worth taking?

You know the playbook that console makers have consulted since 1972 to release and control the flow of new hardware? Yeah, Microsoft is tearing it up. The eighth-console generation is effectively over, just three years after the Xbox One and PlayStation 4 ushered it into existence. In fact, the idea of a 'console generation' itself is finished, in the traditional sense, at least. Ultimately, the state of the market forced Microsoft's hand to pull something drastic. Sony is sitting pretty with over 40 million units sold – double that of the Xbox One. Third-party games routinely look and perform worse than their equivalents on PS4, while Nintendo has become something of a threatening wildcard with the NX on the near horizon. Clearly, something had to change.

Microsoft responded to consumer pressure in the only way that it could, by going overkill. Two new 4K-ready consoles and a leap into the world of virtual reality is Microsoft issuing a challenging to the competition. New initiatives to unify the Xbox and Windows 10 install bases is seen as an imperative step to growing the install base. A slate of new features designed to help cultivate communities and create an unrivalled hub for competitive gaming is a gift to the loyalists that took a bet on Xbox three years ago. Sony's marketing mantra for the PS4 may be "for the players", but Microsoft is attempting to steal it right out from under them.

It's a bold move and it isn't completely clear what the implications will be. For Microsoft, who is issuing challenges purposefully and early; for the gaming industry itself, structurally unprepared to deal with a new state of play; and, most importantly, us – the gamers that have to pay for all this new kit. Ultimately, this entire endeavour is going to prove to be either a revelation for consumers or a wild gambit that could end Microsoft's ambitions in the market entirely.

> "If you don't own a 4K-ready television, or have an immediate plan to purchase one, Microsoft is advising you to either stick with the Xbox One"

DATA STREAM → MICROSOFT HAS SOLD 1 MILLION XBOX ELITE CONTROLLERS SINCE THEIR LAUNCH

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Killer new initiatives

→ How Microsoft wants to make Xbox One the best place to play

CREATE A CLUB

■ Did you play *Halo 2* online? Do you remember how it integrated clans directly into its multiplayer system, letting you forge your own little community of like-minded gamers? We've been waiting for it to be integrated into the Xbox proper for years. Microsoft is finally delivering, giving players a private space to connect "with people who have similar play styles, personal interests and values."

LOOKING FOR GROUP

■ Gaming has become inherently focused around multiplayer and co-op in the last three years – almost every release has it in one fashion or another. But finding players to play with can be a chore. No longer will this be the case, as Microsoft adds a 'Looking For Group' feature directly into the Xbox One dashboard, designed to connect you with other players easily.

COMPETITIVE GAMING HUB

■ eSports has swept gaming, becoming one of the biggest and most interesting areas of the industry in the last few years. Arena is a new online tournament platform designed for everyone – from novice to pro – and brings competitive gaming directly to Xbox One and Windows 10. You'll be able to sign up to tournaments from the dashboard or accompanying app and play for Microsoft-approved prizes.

CROSS-PLAY GAMING

■ As part of its Play Anywhere initiative – bridging the gap between Xbox One and Windows 10 – Microsoft is pushing devs to include cross-play multiplayer into its biggest new games. *Gears Of War 4*, *Sea Of Thieves*, *Forza Horizon 3* and *Scalebound* will be playable across Xbox Live with your friends on Windows 10. Microsoft is trying to make it as easy as possible to play with your friends.

Welcome to 4K Gaming

The idea that hardware has to remain largely unchanged throughout a machine's lifespan is an outdated principle. For Microsoft – who launched the Xbox One immediately on the back-foot in 2013 – the reveal of Project Scorpio is a statement of intent directed at Sony and Nintendo. An appropriation of the PC upgrade culture and an opportunity to properly (finally) clean up the messes left by Don Mattrick clearly leading the early marketing. Power is everything in modern gaming, and Microsoft intends to be the most powerful player in the industry.

That's why Microsoft isn't holding back, revealing Project Scorpio as "the most powerful console ever created". It's a new machine that utilises a staggering six teraflops of GPU power to enable 4K-native gaming and "high fidelity" virtual reality experiences. This isn't a mere refresh of the old hardware but an opportunity for the Xbox team, led by the ever-enthusiastic Phil Spencer, to give the division a fighting chance in 2017 and beyond. With Sony launching PlayStation VR this October, armchair analysts were convinced the 20 million unit sales gap between the Xbox One and PS4 was only going to widen, and we were inclined to agree.

Of course, 20 million Xbox Ones in homes around the world isn't a number to turn your nose up at either. That's why Microsoft has (and continues) to stress that Project Scorpio will "join the Xbox One family and coexist alongside" the current hardware available. But still there's a very real concern that the release of Project Scorpio could divide the install base – causing irreparable harm.

"No one would be left behind" is the clear and powerful message from Phil Spencer, confirming that all of your Xbox One games and accessories will be compatible across all Xbox platforms regardless of what model you decide to pick. But when it comes to how games will actually utilise the power, the message is a little muddier. Spencer himself has been quoted in two separate interviews offering contradictory views of the system: in one instance confirming

Above Microsoft revealed a great line-up of games for 2016, though it looked a little weaker than previous years we've seen.

Below A handful of new features designed to make the Xbox Live service even better.

→ PLAYSTATION PLUS NOW HAS ALMOST 21 MILLION PAID SUBSCRIBERS ON ITS SERVICE →

Inset Coming this autumn, the Xbox One S is a slimmer version of the original console that can run 4K video out of the box.

that the newfound processing power doesn't necessarily need to be applied to running games in 4K – that developers could use it in other ways to provide value for those without a 4K television – and then in another suggesting that gamers who don't own a state-of-the-art TV would be better off purchasing an Xbox One S; the benefits of Project Scorpio lost on those stuck in the HD era.

It's here where we begin to see flashes of the old Microsoft rearing its head. We've seen instances like this crop up from many different executive members since the announcement, and it begs the question: if the Xbox team doesn't properly understand Scorpio, how are we supposed to? These are concerns that need to be swept up and dealt with quickly. Project Scorpio was revealed early – in an attempt to get ahead of Sony's own foray into 4K gaming? – but now there are more questions than answers.

Below The Play Anywhere program lets Xbox One gamers connect with those on Windows 10 on the biggest first-party titles.

> "The Xbox One S is essentially one of the cheapest 4K media centres on the market"

It's also too early to know how developers will mitigate and manage the added stress and pressure of supporting multiple specifications of their games, though we do know that this console will be capable of running games in a higher resolution and at a better frame-rate. The Scorpio is close to four times more powerful than the Xbox One – reports even suggesting that it is substantially more powerful than Sony's own confirmed (but as yet unannounced) PS4K 'Neo' – how developers are able (and allowed) to harness this influx of power will massively shape the next few years of the gaming landscape.

If all games are available across all Xbox platforms this could begin to cause problems for players – especially in online multiplayer scenarios where the difference between a few pixels (or indeed the frame-rate shift from 30 to 60) can mean everything. Would this happen? Will new releases even be able to link Xbox One and Scorpio multiplayers? These questions have been asked, but no definitive answers are been given, likely because Microsoft itself doesn't know yet – that's the flaw in revealing a product 16 months out from its expected launch.

For better or worse, Microsoft and Sony are changing the rules of the game. What can be said of Project Scorpio is that it's bringing in a new generation of hardware, but just not in any way that we are familiar with in gaming. It's going to be a premium product that benefits the hardcore, tech enthusiasts and – critically – 4K early-adopters. It'll bring 'premium' virtual reality to console for the first time, offering an experience that could likely out-perform PSVR.

With Fallout 4 developer Bethesda already speaking up in support, it's likely this means that the HTC Vive is being flirted with – though Microsoft's long-running relationship with Oculus could also make the Oculus Rift Microsoft's VR headset of choice. Ultimately if you aren't interested in VR and 4K gaming – or can't afford it, as is more likely to be the case – you should still game safe in the knowledge that you aren't being left behind, nor are you being strong-armed to upgrade. This is a new generation of console, but new hardware is no longer the be all, end all that it once was.

Essentially, if you don't own a 4K-ready television, or have an immediate plan to purchase one, Microsoft is advising you to either stick with your Xbox One or purchase the new Xbox One S; out in a few months, it's the

DATA STREAM → THE MINECRAFT MOVIE HAS BEEN GIVEN A RELEASE DATE OF 24 MAY 2019

smallest and most compact Xbox console ever. The hardware is 40 percent smaller than the original Xbox One, boasting an internal power supply and – interestingly – also supports 4K Ultra HD for both Blu-ray and streamed media. At a starting price of £249.99, it's essentially one of the cheapest 4K media centres on the market, a situation not overly dissimilar to the one Sony found itself in at the beginning of the last generation with the release of the PlayStation 3 and arrival of HD media.

While it requires a (free) USB adapter to make use of Kinect, every other feature and aspect of the Xbox One remains. The console still has an HDMI-IN input, OneGuide is being streamlined and the S even has an IR blaster built into the front of the box; Microsoft is still dominating the battle for input one. First-party games will also see a boost in graphical fidelity for those with a television that supports High Dynamic Range (HDR). While the improvement will be slight (it certainly isn't 4K gaming by any stretch of the imagination), if a title has HDR compatibility you'll see richer, more luminous colours in-game. *Gears Of War 4* is confirmed to have HDR support, as will *Forza Horizon 3* – the developers at Playground Games able to incorporate captured footage of the Australian skies into its own rendered ones, delivering more realistic sky and cloud transformations.

If it seems bizarre to you that Microsoft is releasing the Xbox One S in 2016 only to effectively replace it with an even more powerful machine just a year later, you need to understand how the generations aren't in simple cycles any more. The Xbox One S and Project Scorpio are part of the same family – the same network of content – as the original Xbox One and, thanks to a Play Anywhere initiative, Windows 10 users too. Every first-party game will be coming to both platforms, playable in multiplayer through cross-play compatibility – the install base of the Xbox has just grown exponentially, and it's never been easier to link up and play with friends.

Microsoft has been trapped in a desperate battle to overcome the numerous mistakes that were made in 2013 to almost no avail. Power, in particular, has been a primary concern: the PS4 has remained a constant leader, the fact that it offers a higher resolutions and more stable frame rates has proven to be a constant source of embarrassment. Microsoft is determined to end this narrative, and it's taking a wild gamble to do so. Whether this move succeeds in strengthening the brand and turning the tables in the lucrative European markets or splitting the player base and shattering confidence in the brand remains to be seen. What we do know for certain, however, is that if we start saving up for a 4K-ready TV now, we *might* be able to afford one before Q4 2017.

Xbox chief talks Scorpio, VR and indie games

→ Phil Spencer tells to games™ about Microsoft's plans for the future

How do you feel fans have reacted to the big Xbox announcements this year?
On the positive side, forgetting about anything individually that we said, I think our Xbox fans were happy to see Xbox leading in hardware innovation and taking a leadership role in the industry on what we're trying to do. That's what I'm hearing from Xbox fans – I'm not saying we are doing that or not, but you asked about social sentiment – and that's what I've heard, which is great. I think people love the line-up of games that are shipping this year.

We were definitive about dates and when things are coming and I think that was strong. In terms of questions, people want to know 'Hey, if I have an Xbox One now, am I going to be left behind? Do I need to go buy a Scorpio?' We want to clarify to people: you can upgrade when you want to upgrade. When you decide to upgrade, all of your games, accessories and friends will come with you. We have to prove that, and we're just trying to make people feel certain about that.

How important is it to you that independent developers and their games have a strong presence on Xbox One alongside the triple-A, big budget releases?
I think we lived through a time where console gaming turned into all the big budget studios, whereas PC turned into a place where these indie devs could flourish. I love the fact – and this isn't just an Xbox thing, PlayStation does a great job with indies as well – that console gamers get to see the creativity and the invention… and, frankly, the risk-taking that these indie developers take.

Console gamers today get to take advantage of that. Sony has done a great job there; Chris Charla [director of ID@Xbox] and the ID@Xbox team have over 1,000 games in development right now. We have a unique position because we're Microsoft, we're on Windows as well as Xbox, so seeing the ID community really get excited about both has been great. It's just like anything else: I like my big summer blockbuster movies that come out, but I also like the more soulful things crafted for a specific audience. The fact that we can service both is really good.

Scorpio is a big part of your future strategy – it was the anchor of your show this year – but a lot of what came with that announcement was the announcement of virtual reality on Xbox. Do you think you might look into your own VR device or will you continue to cultivate your relationship with Oculus?
We'll have more to talk about with the specifics of VR, but I'll say this with Project Scorpio: as we talked to people like Todd Howard, whose face was up on our [E3] stage, about what experiences they're building for VR and ensuring that we had the best console for VR development. Six teraflops was important, so we made sure that was a design point for us with Project Scorpio and I'm really proud we're able to hit that and then, in time, deliver that.

I don't see us doing a first-party device; there are a lot of great manufacturers out there that are doing work. We've fostered the VR community on Windows; two weeks ago we were in Taipei talking about holographic Windows and putting the holographic API right into Windows to enable more head-mounted display manufacturing. We're so early in VR, both on the device side and the experience side, right now we just want to foster that creativity.

Inset After months of rumours, Microsoft has finally unveiled Project Scorpio, a high-end addition to the Xbox family designed for VR and 4K gaming.

→ HELLO GAMES AND SKY TV HAVE SETTLED A LEGAL CASE FOR THE USE OF 'SKY' IN ITS GAME TITLE →

IT KNOWS KUNG-FU

Just how much better is the PS4 Neo?

→We break down the estimated specs for Sony's 4K system

While Sony didn't show up to E3 with its new 4K PlayStation, its presence was still felt and its existence confirmed. The PlayStation 4 Neo, as it has come to be known, also referred to as the PS4K or PS4.5, will be an incremental upgrade on the current machine, not a replacement for it. Much like Microsoft's plan for Project Scorpio, it's intended to offer players an upgraded option for a new console, with current machines remaining in circulation as a budget choice. Here's what to expect with the new system...

NEW TECH:
8GB GDDR5 MEMORY

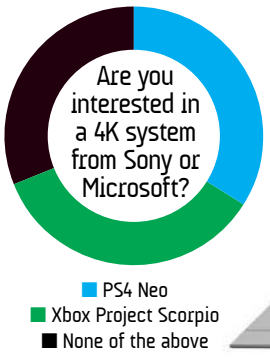
COMPARISON:
Actually, it's the same

WHAT DOES IT MEAN? Interesting to note that PS4 Neo is likely to have the same RAM as the original machine, however it could run at 218GB per second rather than its current running speed of 176GB/s. Sony is getting an extra 24 per cent bandwidth from its RAM, 512MB worth of more usable memory.

NEW TECH:
2.1GHZ CPU CLOCK SPEED

COMPARISON:
PS4 runs at 1.6GHz

WHAT DOES IT MEAN? The clock speed is the operating speed of a microprocessor, expression how many cycles it can go through in a second. The PS4 Neo can apparently go through 2,100 cycles a second versus 1,600 in the current model of the console. Essentially, it can handle data faster than ever.



NEW TECH:
4K RESOLUTION

COMPARISON:
1080p upgraded to 4000p

WHAT DOES IT MEAN? Essentially four times the amount of detail in the images that the PS4 will output. That's four times crisper and clearer that what we've come to consider as full HD images. Older games should, in theory, also be upscaled so that they look better on a 4K TV when played through the Neo.

NEW TECH:
GPU WITH 36 COMPUTE UNITS

COMPARISON:
Current PS4 has 18 compute units

WHAT DOES IT MEAN? Now we're onto the GPU and this is about graphics performance. The new GPU of the Neo runs at 911MHz versus 800MHz in the current console and can handle twice as many compute units. What this means is it can handle 2,304 shaders against the 1,152 it could do originally. Essentially, it's doubling its graphical processing output, which makes sense for 4K and VR performance.

DATA STREAM → DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN IS SET TO BE 8-10 HOURS LONG, BUT VERY REPLAYABLE

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> "There is one aspect of it that I believe deserves more celebration: the creature design"
> DAVE CROOKS, DESIGNER, DODGE ROLL GAMES

WHY I ♥...

DARK SOULS

DAVE CROOKS, DESIGNER, DODGE ROLL GAMES

I almost hesitate to say it, given its notoriety in the past couple of years but the truth is that I think the original **Dark Souls** *is the best videogame of all time. There is little I can say that has not already been said about it, but there is one aspect of it that I believe deserves more celebration: the creature design. From Software's enemies and bosses are truly uncanny. They are always bizarrely familiar but at the same time you've never seen anything quite like them. They are often repulsive but somehow distinguished. Couple that with some of the best animations in the industry and it's no wonder that the 'SoulsBorne' games have some of the most memorable encounters in gaming's recent history.* **Thief, Metal Gear Solid, Spelunky,** *and* **Super Meat Boy** *fill out my top five.*

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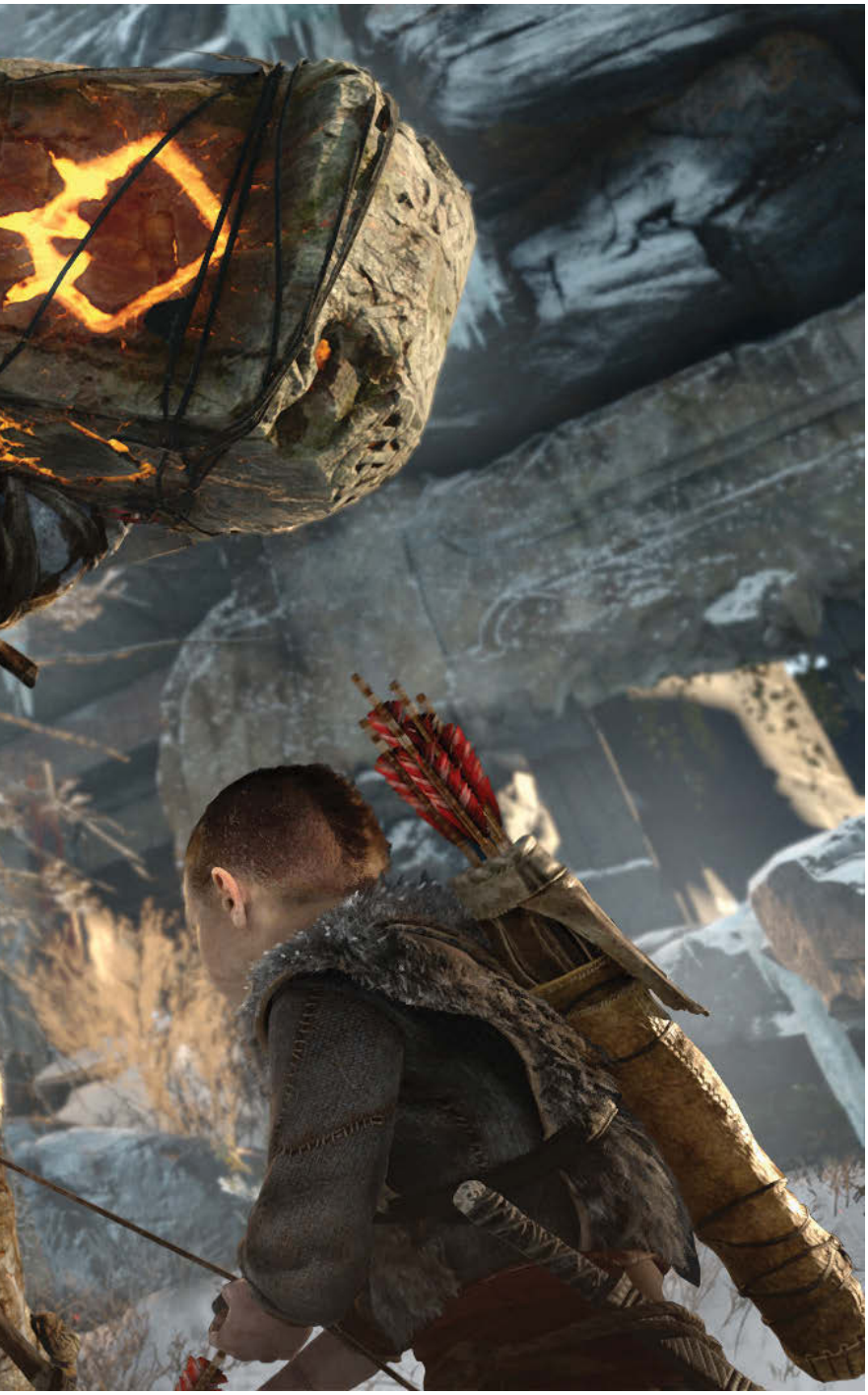
As Kratos hacks at the troll's shins, every blow leaves accurate wounds and when he hits boiling point, that familiar rage is unleashed as horns and teeth shatter, bones are broken and the final blow is dealt without a giant floating button prompt. Nice.



KRATOS COMES OF AGE: REBOOTING GOD OF WAR

DESPITE KRATOS DEVELOPING A CASE OF THE FEELS, THIS NORDIC BLOODBATH IS AS GRIM AS EVER

Format: PS4 **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** Sony
Developer: Sony Santa Monica Studio **Release:** TBC 2017 **Players:** 1

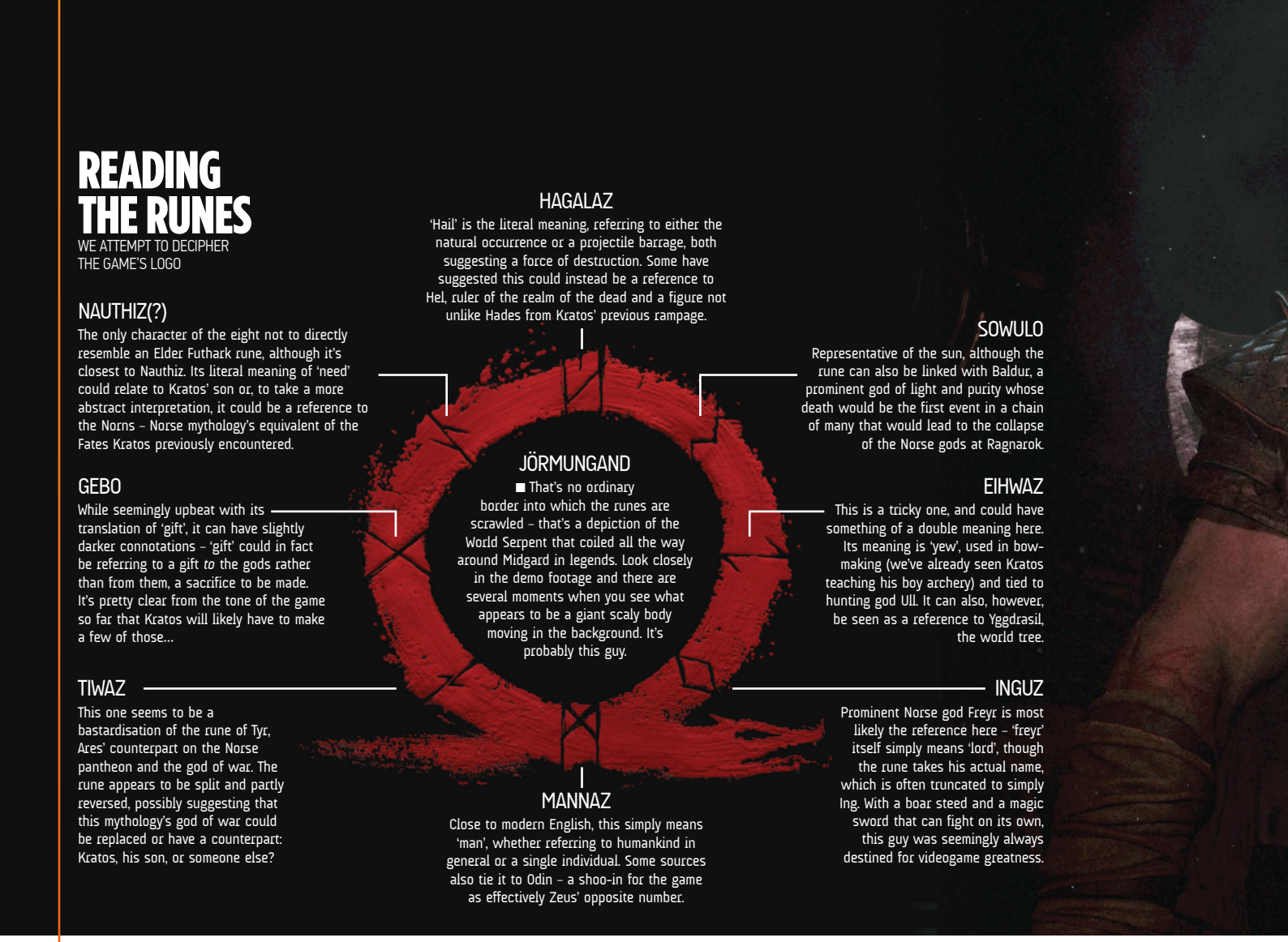
IT'S INCREDIBLY RARE to see a popular series make a sudden change of direction. Fans know what they like, developers know what they're good at, suits know what sells... there's just little reason to switch to a brand new template when everything is already working as intended. *Resident Evil VII*'s surprising shift to first-person horror screams in the face of this suggestion, but there was little left for Capcom to do but to hit the reset button – carried away in the wake of the success and popularity of *Resident Evil 4*'s reinvention as an action game more than a horror one, sequels just ended up getting more and more ridiculous until the scariest thing about the series was the idea of trying to make any sense of its needlessly convoluted overarching narrative, in which the original game's pair of heroes had become a steroid-flavoured, boulder-punching, machine gun-toting beefcake and a mind-controlled assassin cosplaying as Nina Williams while its pantomime villain had died repeatedly and come back with more superpowers every time.

While not perhaps quite so brazenly stupid (and with something of a pass initially, due to its mythical nature), *God Of War* too found itself painted into a corner. Escalation of spectacle meant that Kratos' feats just kept getting more exceptional and his methods increasingly brutal, until all that was left was a walking war cry ripping the limbs off whatever bit-part players from Greek mythology he might have overlooked during his seven-game campaign of fury against Zeus and his mates. Most recently, *Ascension* ticked all the right boxes – it looked incredible, played great and had some killer setpieces – but desensitised as we all are to Kratos' murderous antics, it simply lacked impact. Which, for a game about doing battle with mythical beasts and deities, is probably one of the worst things you could say about it. Kratos, having started life as the victim, had been reduced to an antihero out for perpetual vengeance whose one last dimension (that of pure anger) had begun to wear thin.

We have to admit to being taken by surprise slightly when a thick-bearded Kratos stepped out of the shadows at the beginning of the first gameplay demo of this completely new direction for *God Of War.* The most obviously solution to the team's predicament would have been to leave him behind and start a brand new saga – a fresh face for a fresh start. Comments from director Cory Barlog suggest this might still be the case, just not immediately. Kratos' son, while seemingly not directly playable in this first chapter, is clearly being set up to succeed his old man, the entirety of the game looking to be a father-and-son adventure that introduces us to not only the new potential star of the show but also to a character we've never really met before – Kratos himself. No longer blinded by a lust for bloody vengeance having devoured the entire Greek mythology platter, this new framework shows us a whole new side of the Sony icon. Outside of his tragic origin story, we've only really been privy to his godly antics »

READING THE RUNES

WE ATTEMPT TO DECIPHER THE GAME'S LOGO



HAGALAZ

'Hail' is the literal meaning, referring to either the natural occurrence or a projectile barrage, both suggesting a force of destruction. Some have suggested this could instead be a reference to Hel, ruler of the realm of the dead and a figure not unlike Hades from Kratos' previous rampage.

NAUTHIZ(?)

The only character of the eight not to directly resemble an Elder Futhark rune, although it's closest to Nauthiz. Its literal meaning of 'need' could relate to Kratos' son or, to take a more abstract interpretation, it could be a reference to the Norns – Norse mythology's equivalent of the Fates Kratos previously encountered.

SOWULO

Representative of the sun, although the rune can also be linked with Baldur, a prominent god of light and purity whose death would be the first event in a chain of many that would lead to the collapse of the Norse gods at Ragnarok.

GEBO

While seemingly upbeat with its translation of 'gift', it can have slightly darker connotations – 'gift' could in fact be referring to a gift *to* the gods rather than from them, a sacrifice to be made. It's pretty clear from the tone of the game so far that Kratos will likely have to make a few of those...

JÖRMUNGAND

■ That's no ordinary border into which the runes are scrawled – that's a depiction of the World Serpent that coiled all the way around Midgard in legends. Look closely in the demo footage and there are several moments when you see what appears to be a giant scaly body moving in the background. It's probably this guy.

EIHWAZ

This is a tricky one, and could have something of a double meaning here. Its meaning is 'yew', used in bow-making (we've already seen Kratos teaching his boy archery) and tied to hunting god Ull. It can also, however, be seen as a reference to Yggdrasil, the world tree.

TIWAZ

This one seems to be a bastardisation of the rune of Tyr, Ares' counterpart on the Norse pantheon and the god of war. The rune appears to be split and partly reversed, possibly suggesting that this mythology's god of war could be replaced or have a counterpart: Kratos, his son, or someone else?

INGUZ

Prominent Norse god Freyr is most likely the reference here – 'freyr' itself simply means 'lord', though the rune takes his actual name, which is often truncated to simply Ing. With a boar steed and a magic sword that can fight on its own, this guy was seemingly always destined for videogame greatness.

MANNAZ

Close to modern English, this simply means 'man', whether referring to humankind in general or a single individual. Some sources also tie it to Odin – a shoo-in for the game as effectively Zeus' opposite number.

» but as a demi-god, that's literally only half of who he is. Finally getting to see more of the human side of Kratos is refreshing, unexpected and, in truth, exactly what the franchise needed.

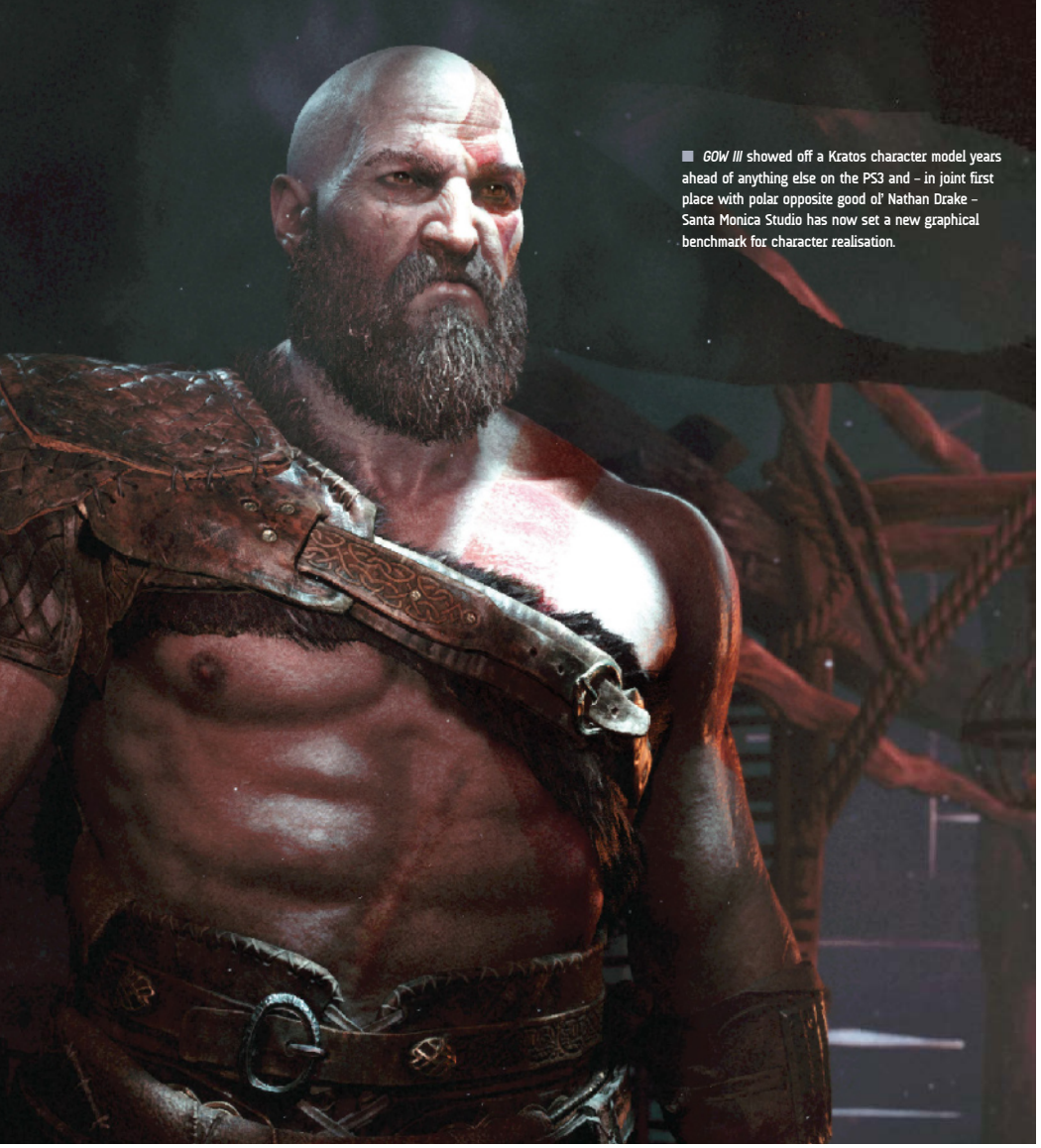
It's a more personal tale, then, and that calls for a more personal approach. Gone is the fixed camera in favour of an over-the-shoulder affair that brings us in closer to the action. Instead of a cheap-seats view of a guy flinging chains at hordes of enemies, we're treated to more intimate encounters with just a few enemies, but where every last detail shines through. Kratos' new axe hacks out chunks of flesh with each weighty, purposeful blow, severing body parts and leaving lasting gaping wounds that weep and spurt as fights draw on. Those that claim that the spectacle is lost are missing the point – it's just a different kind of spectacle now, one of minutia rather than grandiosity, although Barlog has addressed concerns by stating that the camera can still pull back should the hordes of old return at any point. Just as with stablemate *Uncharted 4*, the attention to detail is simply staggering and pulling in closer really lets us get a great feel for the new setting, in which the Norse pantheon replaces the now-extinct Greek one. The closer perspective also echoes the narrative to a degree, highlighting subtleties in the interactions between father and son that would have been impossible to make out before. There's a beautiful shot at the end of the demo where, after guiding his son through his first hunt and kill, Kratos extend his arm to comfort the shaken child, pauses, then retracts it. Indecision and (attempted) tenderness are not things we've seen from the yelling dervish of blades previously, and it's oddly affecting.

So what do we know about the kid? Very little at this point, truth be told. His identity, as well as that of his mother, looks to be an integral part of the narrative. The fact that neither has even been named yet suggests that they'll both be revealed as existing persons from this new lore, or will go on to replace such characters, as Kratos did Ares in his own debut. Look closely at the kid's face and you can see scarring around his left eye that closely resembles the familiar red pattern on his father's face, leading to rampant speculation in search of a deeper meaning. The idea that Kratos could be training up this era's younger version of himself seems a little far-fetched, especially since we know the older Kratos is the real deal – his arms still bear the scars left by the Blades Of Chaos (albeit hidden under thick gloves and binding much of the time), various aspects of his new design and indeed trinkets spotted in his home when the demo begins

> "LOOK CLOSELY AT THE KID'S FACE AND YOU CAN SEE SCARRING AROUND HIS LEFT EYE THAT CLOSELY RESEMBLES THE FAMILIAR RED PATTERN ON HIS FATHER'S FACE"

leave little room for doubt. It could simply be a symbolic thing, whether to represent the child's destiny as Kratos' replacement or even as a 'sins of the father' deal. His old man does have a fair bit of divine blood on his hands, after all.

While we mentioned earlier that the boy won't be playable, that's perhaps not entirely accurate. You see, Santa Monica Studio has placed such importance on the kid that he's been given his very own button on the DualShock 4. Usage will be context-sensitive, meaning you could call for a bow assist during combat, shout out to him when he wanders too far away or point out small details to him to help in his education, all without the need for an on-screen button prompt. UI in general has been massively cleaned up to let the incredible visuals do all the talking, actually – the near-pointless combo counter of older games is gone, health gauge and gear icons are shrunk and simplified, and finisher prompts are subtle rather than the giant flashing on-screen button symbols of old. Just as losing huge mana gauges and flashing magic icons in favour of a simpler solution helps strengthen the idea of a humanised Kratos, so too does the lack of general 'videogame'



GOW III showed off a Kratos character model years ahead of anything else on the PS3 and – in joint first place with polar opposite good ol' Nathan Drake – Santa Monica Studio has now set a new graphical benchmark for character realisation.

clutter – much of it a hangover from the time of the series' inception over a decade ago – serve to reinforce the positive shift towards mature interactive fiction.

It's a bold step for one of Sony's strongest franchises, but one we can only commend. Watching Kratos lead his son through the forest, there are moments that evoke elements of *The Last Of Us* and *Uncharted*, dynamic and interesting relationships and environmental storytelling finding a new home in a series which, historically, has never needed such devices to help explain its simple 'Angry man kills big things because revenge' story. While earlier *God Of War* titles did justice to their subject matter through design and tone, this reboot looks instead to respect and live among the mythology that inspires it, using it as an entire world for father and son to explore together rather than a checklist of important people to rip apart. That's not to say there won't still be plenty of that, of course; the hulking great troll in the demo gets quite the introduction to Kratos' new combat abilities and teases of giants (as seen strung up in the bandit camp), dragons and even what appears to be a glimpse of Jörmungandr (literally "great beast": the World Serpent that encircles the entire mortal realm in Norse mythology) all suggest even bigger fights are to come. It's just nice to know that for once, there'll be a little more intrigue when meeting new characters than simply trying to work out what grisly fate lies in store for them.

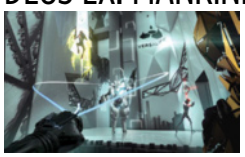
YOOKA-LAYLEE

Playtonic's Kickstarter success story looks better every time we see it, making the fact that it has slipped to early 2017 all the more gutting. The team is winning back platforming fans who may still have nightmares about drowning in collectibles in late Rare titles like *Donkey Kong 64* and *Banjo-Tooie*; rather than endless items that serve little to no purpose, all of *Yooka-Laylee*'s littered trinkets go towards unlocking new tools and abilities.

AGENTS OF MAYHEM

Rather than another sequel to the increasingly ridiculous Saints Row series, Volition's next project is a spin-off that puts players in the shoes of groups of operatives working for the titular organisation. Those hoping for the core series to return to the relative realism of the earlier games might be in luck with this one.

DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED

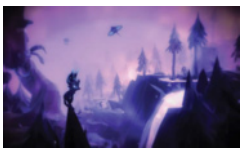


The summer drought is officially cancelled thanks to Square Enix, with this cyberpunk epic arriving just in time to fill the void most publishers are too scared to go near. The quality of the game and strength of the brand mean that it's one of the few titles slated for release this year that could get away with such a play.

GRAN TURISMO SPORT

While the first few glimpses we got of Polyphony's next racer suggested it might be a few laps behind *Forza* and *DriveClub* in terms of handling, a strong showing at E3 helped restore confidence in Sony's most successful exclusive brand. Visuals are typically excellent but now the handling and physics look to also be pulling in line.

FE



Zoink Games actually hid a playable proof-of-concept demo level of the game in its last release, *Zombie Vikings*. A stylish, dialogue-free adventure starring an adorable little wolfdragon thing, it's one of the more interesting titles to be coming from a major publisher (under the new EA Originals banner).

FORZA HORIZON 3
XBOX ONE'S BEST LOOKING GAME EVER

YOU'VE NEVER RACED LIKE THIS BEFORE

Format: Xbox One, Windows 10 **Origin:** UK **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios
Developer: Playground Games **Release:** 27 September 2016 **Players:** TBA

***FORZA HORIZON* HAS** always had a reputation for not taking itself too seriously, of being a staggering change of pace to the simulated-sensibilities of its *Motorsport* counterpart. But this is the year it trademarks preposterous racing in spectacular fashion – *Forza Horizon 3* is without question one of the most chaotically impressive racing games to emerge this generation.

We are waving goodbye to the French Riviera and jetting over to Australia for this third iteration, the country's gorgeously diverse open spaces perfect for Playground Games to expand the series to include extreme off-road racing. The action moves seamlessly between the rolling sand dunes of the outback, to sweeping coastal roads and thick jungle locales, while the variety of vehicles available is staggering; taking muscle and hypercars across cliffside beaches alongside dune buggies and rally-raid trucks already looks to be a riot. Especially as four-player campaign co-op arrives, with the returning Drivatar system instantly synchronising friends from across both Xbox platforms into your world and races in a distinctly impressive fashion.

Forza Horizon 3 isn't just featuring the largest map and car roster of the series to date, it's also making some hugely impressive technical strides that only help to showcase the new Xbox One and Windows 10 partnership. This is a huge statement of intent for Microsoft, a visual and technical showcase that demonstrates that the best place to play racing games may very well be with Xbox.

BETTER THAN EVER

Forza Horizon 3 is set to be one of the first games to support HDR (high dynamic range), a new feature for the Xbox One S that allows better contrast and colour depth – assuming you have a TV that supports it. Playground Games is using this to create huge banks of morphing and evolving clouds – making the sky look as realistic as possible. Footage of beautiful Australian skies captured last summer – recorded using a custom built HDR 12K camera rig – are being impressively incorporated into the game.

CREATE A CREW

Playground Games is furthering its ambitions to make *Forza Horizon* the ultimate road trip adventure. Not only will the game feature four-player campaign co-op for the very first time, but it'll also give you the opportunity to create a crew. You can now recruit your friends' Drivatars to help you gain fans in the Horizon festival and create convoys to explore, regardless of whether they are online. If your buddies are terrible drivers – failing to earn you fans – you can even fire them.

GOING OFF ROAD

With an open world spanning the rocky canyons of the Outback to the gleaming skyscrapers of Australia's Gold Coast, there's a bigger variation of environments than ever. Not only will each of these areas give you varied racing experiences – forcing you to alter your driving style on the fly – but each will also show off the incredible advancements made to the ForzaTech engine. The lighting, water and weather effects make *Forza Horizon 3* look peerless in the genre.

REWARDING THE BOLD

With so much emphasis on new locations, new vehicles and the Windows 10 cross-platform support, there was some concern that the core of *Forza Horizon* might get diluted. Thankfully, Playground is only ramping up the series' absurdity, and it's doing so while ensuring that you are rewarded for your skills and achievements. It doesn't matter whether you're blitzing through speed traps or topping leaderboards by drafting a car, *Forza Horizon* still revels in congratulating you for playing well in the way you like to play.

ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD OPENS THE DOOR TO A NEW HYRULE

BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO THE FRANCHISE

Format: Wii U, NX **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** In-house **Release:** 2017 **Players:** 1

THE ORIGINAL *LEGEND of Zelda* set a brand new bar for adventure games, dropping an elven boy into a hostile world known as Hyrule and leaving him to the player's devices. The game rewarded exploration and curiosity, making it one of the best games of all time. Recent games in the franchise have strayed away from that approach in favour of a formulaic story-driven experience, but after *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild*'s impressive debut at E3 2016 the focus may once again be on the thrill of exploring a brand new world.

The playable demo was split into two parts: one 25-minute session of free roaming through the new and open Hyrule, followed by the first 15 minutes of the full game with all of the story beats and cutscenes intact. Both sessions took place in the same section of Hyrule, a plateau raised from the ground by giant walls and isolated from the rest of the world. Link rises from a bonfire set in the middle of a wooded area and sets off to see what's in store for him.

The new Hyrule in *Breath Of The Wild* is massive, the map stretching as far as the eye can see. The full map is said to be seven times larger than that of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, which is easily the largest the famed kingdom has ever been. Everything that appears in Link's line of sight on the screen can be reached during the main adventure, and marking a point in the world then finding it on the pause menu map really emphasises how incredibly large this game will be.

Before diving into the nitty-gritty of the gameplay, let the record show that *Breath Of The Wild* is strikingly beautiful. This new land of Hyrule looks like it's been ripped right from the most colourful book on a child's shelf, using a hybird of the cel-shading of *Wind Waker* and the realistic approach of games like *Twilight Princess* and *Skyward Sword*. The world explodes with colour as soon as the demo begins, from the lush greens of the fields to the clear and pristine water in the lakes and streams of the world. Getting lost in this open world is just as easy as through sight alone as it is in actually playing the game.

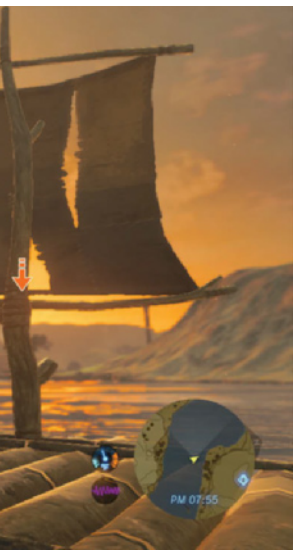
As Link traverses this hostile world, a few key features become immediately apparent. The world is filled with materials for gathering and crafting, allowing Link to make his own supplies and items from resources in the world. For example, he can make a bonfire by resting a bundle of wood on the ground, producing a piece of flint from his inventory, then striking the flint with his sword. He can pick up a branch off of the ground and use that as a weapon instead of his sword, although the branch will not have the same longevity.

That leads right into the next gigantic change in *Breath Of The Wild*: every weapon and piece of armour in the game has statistics associated with them. Weapons have attack power and durability points, armour pieces have set defensive increases, and items on the ground come with the same kind of stats. The branch mentioned earlier has enough durability to strike a single tree before it breaks, while the axe that Link can create from wood and metal in the world can cut down multiple trees with little degradation. Item management isn't going to be to everyone's taste, but this element brings a customisation element to the series that we haven't seen before, making this adventure in Hyrule seem more personal and involving. »

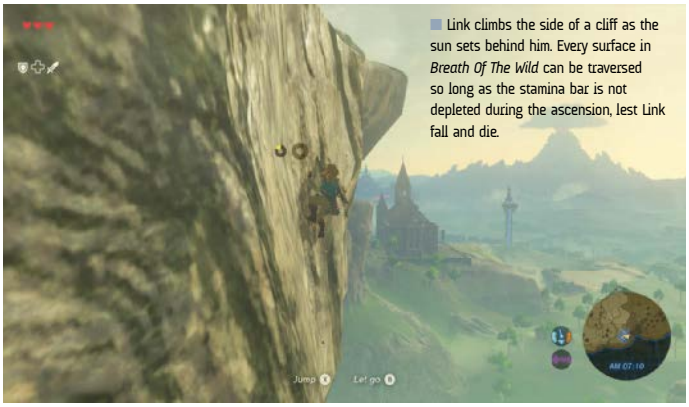
"NINTENDO HAS OUTDONE ITSELF WITH ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD, TURNING HYRULE INTO THE OPEN-WORLD PARADISE WE'VE WANTED SINCE WIND WAKER"

THE SHEIKAH SLATE
LINK'S NEW SMARTPHONE

It may look like the cell phone in your pocket, but the new Sheikah Slate item is far more than just a distraction for Link in *Breath Of The Wild*. This device, when inserted into pedestals strewn throughout Hyrule, activates many of the supernatural and science fiction elements of this new world. At one point Link inserts the Slate into a pedestal, only to suddenly rise thousands of feet in the air as a massive tower emerges under his feet. By looking out from that raised perch – and by also using the Slate as his binoculars – he can see that other towers have also risen all along the Hylian horizon, showing just how powerful this Sheikah Slate can be.



■ Right: Link approaches a Shrine of Trials, hidden dungeons found throughout *Breath Of The Wild*'s Hyrule. Nintendo says there will be over 100 Shrines to complete before the end of the game, so players will be very familiar with these structures. ■ Left: Link uses a Korok Leaf to power a sailboat he crafted in order to cross a giant lake. The Korok Leaf is one of many references to 2003's *The Wind Waker*, causing speculation that the games may be connected somehow.



Link climbs the side of a cliff as the sun sets behind him. Every surface in *Breath Of The Wild* can be traversed so long as the stamina bar is not depleted during the ascension, lest Link fall and die.

Above: Link cooks mushrooms and other vegetables in a giant cauldron outside of his log cabin camp. Link can now gather and cook food for himself in order to restore health, gain boosts, and other perks during his adventure.

» Combat in this world seems to be the least changed part of the game, as it still utilises a targeting system and frequent sword slashes in order to win. Where before this type of combat constrained the overall experience and created hiccups in momentum, this type of battle fits much more snugly in the new open world format. Link can target an enemy as soon as he spots one, approaching softly and silently before shooting an arrow or stabbing the foe from behind. Stealth will likely play a major part in *Breath Of The Wild* as evidenced by the new sound meter. A sound wave indicator shows how much noise Link is making in that moment, with noises too loud summoning enemies that will investigate and eventually attack. If Link crouches and walks slowly, the meter will barely move.

The sound meter is found right next to another brand new part of the heads-up display: a thermometer showing Link's current temperature. Certain areas in *Breath Of The Wild* will see a shift in climate and Link must dress accordingly in order to progress. If the temperature gauge dips too low the gauge will freeze or catch fire depending on the temp's direction, Link will start to take damage over time, and he'll show his discomfort on-screen via chattering teeth or frantic movement to put a fire out. This meter seems like more than just the tunic-swapping mechanic of *Ocarina Of Time*, so it will require a player's full attention during the adventure.

The open-world portion of the story section started immediately, kicking off with a similar scene to the officially released trailer. A soft female voice wakes Link from a deep slumber and tells him to rise from his hidden underground bed. She tells him to pick up the Sheikah Slate – the tablet-looking device used to activate pedestals in the world and look extended distances – before sending him on his way. When he emerges, she points out Hyrule Castle, calling it the only thing capable of holding back a malevolent force known as the "Calamity Ganon", before leaving him to his own devices. Link soon meets an old man with a bushy white beard, dressed in a brown cloak and favouring a hand-glider as his main method of transportation. After speaking to him Link activates a series of towers that rise from the ground throughout the land, and the old man directs Link to his first dungeon test.

So many questions emerge from that brief taste of the story arc: who is the old man and why does he bear a resemblance to the King of Red Lions from *Wind Waker*? How did Link end up in that Vault-like tomb and was he really asleep for 100 years? How evil is Calamity Ganon? Most importantly, where does *Breath Of The Wild* fit in the *Zelda* timeline? It's hard to make any definitive decisions based on what we've seen and NIntendo certainly isn't saying anything, so let the speculation run wild.

Either way, Nintendo has outdone itself with this new instalment, turning Hyrule into the open-world paradise we've wanted since *Wind Waker*. Enhanced RPG elements, a new focus on exploration and discovery, and intriguing story seeds being planted all make the wait for 2017 pretty unbearable. May *Breath Of The Wild* wash over the world sooner rather than later.

"BREATH OF THE WILD WILL SEE A SHIFT IN CLIMATE AND LINK MUST DRESS ACCORDINGLY IN ORDER TO PROGRESS"

THE 100 HOTTEST NEW GAMES

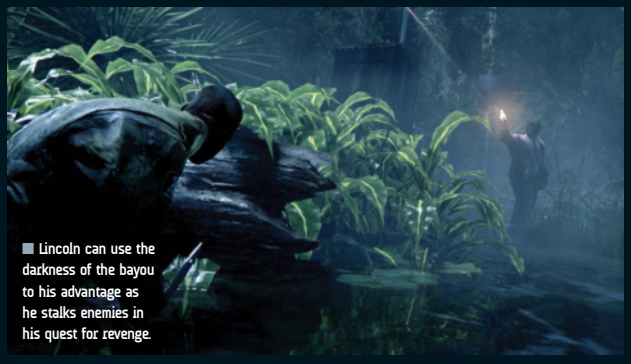
MAFIA III TELLS A STORY OF CRIME WITH SOME CAJUN STYLE

THE NEXT INSTALMENT IN THE MAFIA FRANCHISE DITCHES THE CITY LIFE FOR SOME BAYOU BEATDOWNS

Format: Xbox One, PlayStation 4, PC **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** 2K Games **Developer:** Hangar 13 **Release:** 7 October 2016 **Players:** 1

2K GAMES IS returning to the world of organised crime with *Mafia III*, trusting it to the brand new studio called Hangar 13. If the game's presence at E3 2016 is any indication, 2K is supremely confident in its fledging development team. The story follows Lincoln Clay, an orphan who thought he had seen the worst side of humanity while serving in Vietnam. Unfortunately upon his return to the fictional city of New Bordeaux, the world of organised crime proved him wrong. After losing his friends in a mob-related shooting, Clay resolves to get revenge on the local mob boss while taking over the city himself.

The demo shown recently brought two important elements of *Mafia III* to light. First is the cover-based combat system, with Lincoln deftly moving between cover while taking out enemies. If an enemy gets too close, Clay can take them out in brutal fashion via special "executions" involving a gun and the unlucky enemy's face. The second is the "lieutenant" system, which we've talked about previously; when Clay takes over a section of the city he can assign one of his lieutenants to control it, but favouring one too much can cause dissent among the ranks... It's the one mechanic we'll really have to wait until release to see how truly effective it is.



Lincoln can use the darkness of the bayou to his advantage as he stalks enemies in his quest for revenge.

SUDA 51'S LATEST TELLS US TO LET IT DIE

GRASSHOPPER IS UP TO ITS OLD TRICKS WITH THIS BIZARRE ACTION GAME

Format: PS4, PC **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Gungho Entertainment **Developer:** Grasshopper Manufacture **Release:** 2016 **Players:** 1

SUDA 51 AND his team at Grasshopper Manufacture are known for eccentricity, but they may have outdone themselves with *Let It Die*. The E3 hands-on demo led to more questions being asked than answered, though it still provided a good amount of fun.

The demo drops you into a savage world of dangerous psychopaths wearing nothing but a pair of boxers and gas masks. It's up to your hero to find clothes for armour and weapons for defending himself before trying to escape this maniacal prison. Thankfully some clothes are conveniently placed in a suitcase right in front of him, while a lead pipe casually leans against a wall a few short steps away from the starting point.

Combat is fairly straightforward, with button-mashing attacks and the fun coming from the sheer madness surrounding it all. Enemies range from bizarre monstrosities with cages for heads to giant abominations that absorb way too much punishment. When the player is killed – and they'll be killed often if this is indicative of the full game – the camera zooms out and a woman calling herself an "insurance agent" asks if he wants to continue. The purpose of this is still unknown, but it sure fits in with Suda's style. *Let It Die* is a strange experience, but luckily that does not overshadow the game's ability to be fun. The world will get the chance to *Let It Die* (whatever "it" is) later in 2016.

TITANFALL 2 RAMPS UP THE ACTION FOR ROUND TWO

HANDS-ON WITH ONE OF 2016'S MOST PROMISING SHOOTERS

Format: Xbox One, Windows 10, PS4 **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** EA **Developer:** Respawn Entertainment **Release:** 28 October 2016 **Players:** 1-16

TITANFALL 2 MAKES a strong first impression. If ever there was a concern that developer Respawn Entertainment would be forced to dilute the core competitive experience as it shifted towards a multiplatform release have been immediately obliterated following some hands-on time with the upcoming shooter. There's an instant thrill to be found being back in this universe, nimbly darting between walls and rooftops as a Pilot; strapping yourself back into an all-powerful personalised Titan and unleashing hell on all manner of unsuspecting enemy and AI players. This is the ***Titanfall*** that you fell in love with back in 2014, only its content and action have been greatly expanded in scope and appeal.

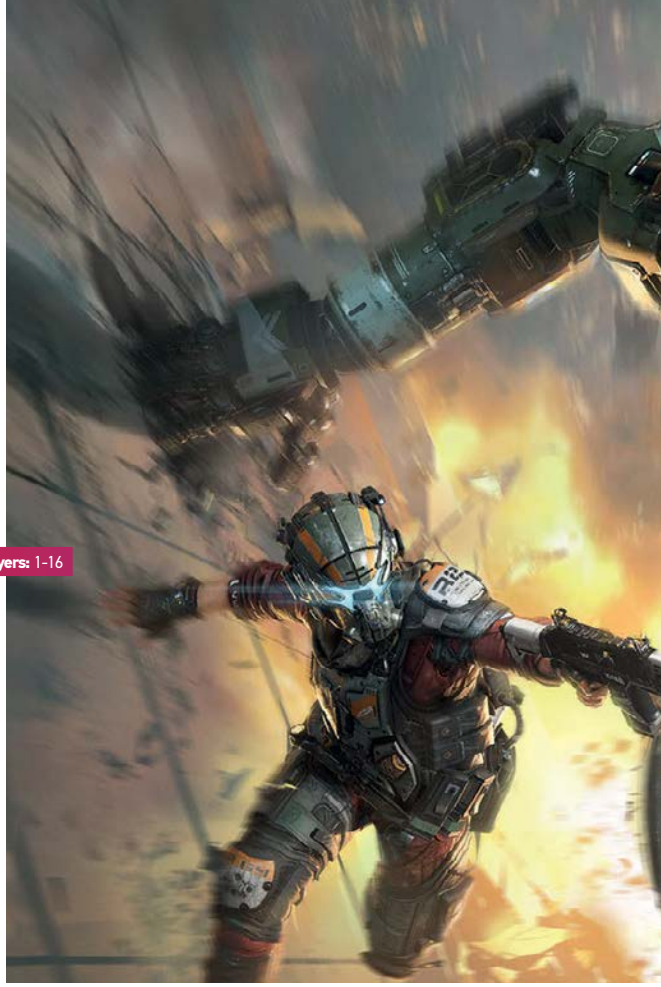
> "RESPAWN HAS TAPPED INTO SOMETHING SPECIAL WITH TITANFALL 2, DOING JUST ENOUGH TO KEEP THE GAME FEELING UNIQUE"

Respawn has tapped into something special with *Titanfall 2*, doing just enough to keep the game feeling unique – even as *Call Of Duty* does its best to bolt environmental traversal onto its aching template to compete. Much like its predecessor, *Titanfall 2* still rewards those with a mastery of vertical space – Pilots with strong spatial awareness will still easily topple even the biggest of foes and outrun the most trigger happy of enemies – though Respawn is introducing new tools to cut back the learning curve and, ultimately, refine its hyperactive arena play even further.

The Front Rifleman is the standout addition, a class offering a grappling hook as a tool that attaches to essentially any surface in the environment. Any fear that this would simplify traversal are immediately quelled when combined with the shooter's trademark wall running and jet pack-assisted movement. For the newbie, it is designed to get players around the basic idea and importance of movement. Skilled Pilots, on the other hand, will be able to move with deft precision; bounding across the rooftops overlooking the chaos at street level, pulling themselves between rooftops with speed, darting between enemy Titans and even yanking enemies towards them from adjacent buildings for the ultimate glory kills. It's a simple but stunning addition to the game. The grappling hook rewards smart, inventive play and, perhaps most integrally, gives *Titanfall* a newfound sense of momentum that is quite simply peerless in the shooter space.

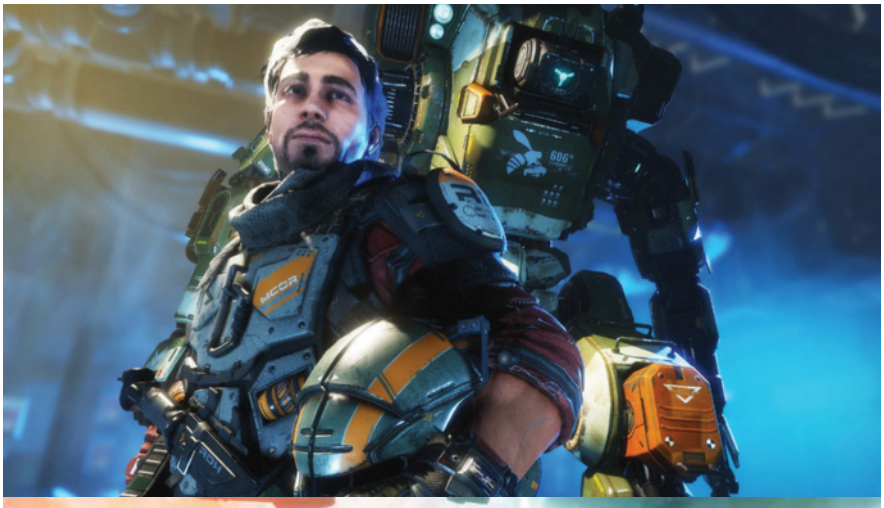
A grappling hook isn't all that Respawn is bringing to this sequel, of course, each new Pilot and Titan class felt as clearly defined. The Counter Sniper class came equipped with a wicked S2 Double Take long-range rifle and gravity stars that fiercely shift the gravity around unsuspecting players to great affect. The Scorch Titan-class offered up a brutal AOE Flame Core attack that turns the ground around you into a blazing inferno, whereas Ion could utilise a punishing focused laser attack to take down Pilots with pinpoint precision. Whenever a player changed Pilot or Titan class, the effect it had on the pace of firefights and tactics in play shifted dramatically – *Titanfall 2* is making a great effort to keep play as varied as possible, whilst still keeping its core design pillars intact.

Respawn is tackling the criticism levied at its debut game with a lot of heart and expertise. Concerns over content are being leveraged by a commitment to delivering free DLC maps. Progression is being enhanced by greatly expanding the variety of weapons and equipment available. Those on a hate campaign against the AI grunts – whose deaths tick over your Titan respawn clock – will be happy to hear certain multiplayer modes will be without them, and the addition of a single-player campaign should sort out that vocal minority who would rather listen to exposition than brutally grapple hook-melee kill somebody out of the sky as you both eject out of exploding Titans – each to their own, we guess.



Above: *Titanfall 2* confidently expands the key gameplay aspects of its predecessor and it does it in an impressive fashion. It is faster and certainly more furious, but a whole lot more fun. It may be launching between *Battlefield* and *Call Of Duty* this year, but it still offers a style of gameplay that neither can match.

Left: Respawn is launching *Titanfall 2* with six brand new Titan classes, while only two have been revealed thus far they have proven to be fantastic additions. They shift play in an immediate fashion, making it even more dangerous for Pilots to be seen on ground level. Below: It'll be interesting to see how Respawn handles a single-player campaign, the last time this team of developers handled one would have been back in 2009's *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*.



MADDEN NFL 17

This year *Madden* is taking strides to not only make the game a little more exciting and recreate those great crowd-pleasing moments, but also make to those moments more accessible. New skill moves are being introduced and mapped to certain positions, while players using lower difficulties will see dukes and spins pulled off automatically. Both are very welcome additions.

HARMONIX MUSIC VR

Launching alongside PSVR this October, Harmonix is releasing music visualisation software for the upcoming virtual reality headset. While it comes loaded with 17 songs, you'll actually be able to experience your entire music library – loaded from a USB drive – in VR, dropping you into the sonics in a way you've never experienced before. It's certainly quirky, though whether it holds up over longer play sessions remains to be seen.

VAMPYR

We're at a bit of a loss with *Vampyr*. While Dontnod earned itself an awful lot of goodwill with *Life Is Strange*, something still seems a little off about its latest; a strange blend of RPG adventure systems and interactive drama. Starring a doctor torn between his lust for blood and the Hippocratic Oath, it certainly has potential, though the gameplay still looks a little weak.

FRIDAY THE 13TH: THE GAME

One of the more interesting asymmetrical multiplayer games to emerge in 2016, *Friday The 13th: The Game* pitches a group of wayward teens against the murder machine himself, Jason Voorhees. Judging by the pre-alpha, it certainly has the potential to thrill for groups of friends – though we can't escape the fear that it'll quickly grow stale – the ailing film franchise has taught us as much.

WE HAPPY FEW

The more we see this, the more we're confident it will be one of the breakout indie hits of the year, *We Happy Few* is as charming as it is terrifying, pushing you to escape a small town in Britain in the Sixties as a bunch of drugged-up crazies hunt you down. It's challenging but ultimately enjoyable, but don't take our word for it – it's available on Xbox One Preview Program right now.

As ever, this game impresses with the sheer number of zombies it has on screen at any given time. They don't often offer a challenge, but messing with them remains a lot of fun.

DEAD RISING 4 IS FAMILIAR YET WELCOME

LIKE AN OLD FRIEND JOINING YOU FOR CHRISTMAS DINNER

Format: Xbox One, PC **Origin:** Canada **Publisher:** Microsoft Studios **Developer:** Capcom Vancouver **Release:** 6 December 2016 **Players:** 1-TBC

IF IT AIN'T broke, attach a chainsaw to it. And also go back to the best setting of the series. That feels like what Capcom Vancouver has been saying with this return of the original *Dead Rising*'s Frank West and a move back to Willamette, Colorado and its famous shopping mall. *Dead Rising 4* is not a reboot or remake of the original, but a return to probably its most compelling setting. A return to that giant shopping complex (and the wider town around it this time), with all the updated systems, improved save mechanics and increased insanity that two sequels have already brought to the series.

Returning to this familiar stomping ground is an instant joy. The variety of items available, the confines of the mall and the possibilities in an expanded surrounding area are all very welcome. Having the game set around Christmas is a nice touch, as well. We explored the town portion of the new game more than anything, equipped with three weapons, all of which can be called upon at any time. If there's one really significant addition to this game, then it's the new three-weapon system with ranged, thrown and melee weapons each occupying a different button on the controller. It means you can be equipped with multiple weapons at once, allowing for far more tactical play and conservation of resources. We set out with an electrified axe, a fireworks launcher and a grenade to see how many limbs we could leave scattered on the floor.

This approach to weaponry speaks to a renewed focus on ease of play and fun. *Dead Rising* has always about being creative in how you approached and handled its hordes of zombies, but it tended to have systems that got in the way. *Dead Rising 4* pulls the last vestiges of that away and replaces them with fluid weapon-switching, killstreaks, and power armour. As you chain together zombie kills, you build up energy for a super move. In the case of our electric axe it meant a charged attack, not unlike Thor unleashing lightning from his hammer. And speaking of the Avengers, the exosuit immediately recalls Iron Man, allowing you to punch cars across the map and rip up parking meters to swing at the heads of the undead. But the last *Dead Rising* wasn't all bad and while Frank doesn't have the mechanics background of Nick Ramos, you can still combine junk, weapons and derelict vehicles together into new weapons of mass dismemberment.

The crafting system of this series has gone from strength to strength and is in fine form here. Of course, what Frank is rather good at is being a photographer and it's great to see the camera gameplay return for *Dead Rising 4*. You can now take a selfie in the game whenever you like and use the D-pad to change Frank's expression. We imagine we're going to have a lot of fun with that when the game launches.

Below: Exploring the expanded Willamette sandbox will lead you to find all sorts of random events and loot drops. You never know what small stories, NPCs or pieces of equipment you might find off the beaten path.

At just about any time in *Sea Of Thieves* you can bust out an accordion and play a little sea shanty, used to great effect whilst taunting enemy players from the deck after sinking their ship with a barrage of cannon fire.

OVERCOMING HOSTILITY SELLS THE **SEA OF THIEVES** EXPERIENCE

DO PIRATES PLAY WELL WITH OTHERS?

Format: Xbox One, Windows 10 **Origin:** UK **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios **Developer:** Rare **Release:** 2016 **Players:** MMO

SEA OF THIEVES is going to live or die by the community that rallies around it. While veteran development outfit Rare is doing its absolute best to avoid branding its latest an MMO – instead opting to follow Bungie into the murky depths of the "shared world" mantra – everything *Sea Of Thieves* is doing is obstinately MMO in scope and execution.

It's a chaotic, spectacular multiplayer game in which you and a few buddies team up and sail the high seas; getting merry on grog and attempting to sink anything that looks even slightly sinkable. In this world of pirates and plunder, you make your own destiny. With no over-arching story to speak of, Rare is banking on your misadventures being ridiculous enough to keep you hooked into its gorgeous sun-soaked open world.

Thankfully, Rare has managed to expertly capture the essence of fun in a co-operative environment in an immensely impressive fashion. Instead of locking you down to fulfil a certain role or duty, your command of one of *Sea Of Thieves*' upgradable sailing vessels is entirely organic. You and a crew of four other pirates climb aboard deck, raise the anchor, trim the sails and set course for adventure. From there you can do whatever you want, be it treasure-seeking, hunting sea monsters, taking on quests or "interacting" with other crews of real players.

On the surface, *Sea Of Thieves* may not look like it has a lot of depth to it, though in reality that couldn't be further from the truth. To keep your ship moving – let alone get it prepared and positioned for ship-to-ship combat – requires every player to take on different

positions to stay afloat. That means somebody needs to be in the crow's nest to give directions to the captain at the helm – their vision obscured by the mast – while another player might be needed to raise and lower the sails to alter your turning radius. The anchor can be used by inspired groups to make split-second navigational changes, while all five of you must switch positions to set off the cannons or attempt to repair structural damage to your ship to avoid sinking.

It's chaotic, it really is – but it's also a lot of fun. While it may sound complicated, it's built on an intuitive and user-friendly design. *Sea Of Thieves* has a way of encouraging riotous laughter from its players – something you'll all get to discover when a beta launches later this year – though it's still difficult to get a sense of how it will handle in the open waters of Xbox Live, where having a microphone isn't required but simply advised. Rare is designing a game that requires people to play nicely with others – ultimately, it's that trust in the denizens of Xbox Live that could allow *Sea Of Thieves* to sink or swim.

SKYLANDERS IMAGINATORS

This year's trip to the toys-to-life well gives us perhaps Activision's boldest play yet, shifting the focus away from preset characters and onto user-created heroes. Like the crystals from *Trap Team*, these original characters are stored in generic elemental stones for use with the new portal, perhaps paving the way for a more complex modular structure for future toys.

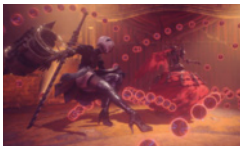
MORPHIES LAW

An ingenious twist on the arena FPS setup, where dealing damage to an enemy decreases their size while increasing your own. This works on a per-region basis, meaning that pumping shots into opponents' heads will shrink their weak spots while making your own a bigger target. The most interesting element, however are the friendly fire mechanics – blast a team-mate in the legs and yours will grow, granting better mobility.

ARK: SURVIVAL EVOLVED

There's a lot of interesting new stuff coming to *Ark*. Perhaps the most appealing of the mods is Primal Survival, allowing you to hang up your boring human clothes to instead attempt survival as any of the creatures found in the world. It takes a special kind of person to want to play as a giant termite, but bombing around with friends as a pack of wolves looks like great fun.

NIER: AUTOMATA



It beggars belief that one of the most divisive RPG adventures to ever see global release is getting a sequel, but we're glad it is – combat and graphics were the two weakest aspects of the original and while the latter gets a free pass for its distinctive art style, the former is already bearing the fruit of bringing PlatinumGames on board. Boss battles are pure spectacles of skill and drama.

DUAL UNIVERSE

Falling somewhere between the limitless *No Man's Sky* and the player-controlled economy of *EVE Online*, *Dual Universe* is an incredibly ambitious project set to allow players to create, destroy and do whatever they want in an interstellar setting without boundaries. No goal, no levels, no preset classes, skills are honed through experience, but that's all. It's down to you as to how you want to play.

HUNTING 101 FOR THE POST-APOCALYPTIC SURVIVALIST

Kill big, get better loot. These almighty brutes will drop shards and other goodies, which will act as currency: allowing you to buy weapons, attributes and outfits to improve your game. Of course, the bigger foes will reward you with more valuable shards that will give you greater rewards. It's all pretty familiar, so if you're feeling up to the challenge, or just thoroughly enjoy the combat styles, then going out hunting will do you the world of good. There really aren't enough superlatives to describe how large they are, but think *Monster Hunter*. Weapon upgrades include more fire types for your bow, increasing slow-down times amongst other abilities and gifting you more powerful tools to use. Outfits will aid you in combat, giving you that trendy "I killed this myself" look.

Hard not to say it but this is among one of the prettiest games on the PS4, easily one of the most unique too.

Above Every enemy we encountered had us perplexed, both in how it was ever designed and how on earth we were going to kill it. Below Not many games offer the chance for you to be so under-equipped to deal with foes, giving you the challenge you crave. It's challenging but rewarding, and might leave you feeling like you want to head back with renewed vigour to that bit in *Dark Souls* that you got stuck on.

Horizon: Zero Dawn has really strong story potential; machines parading through luscious greenery is definitely something we want to be engaging with.

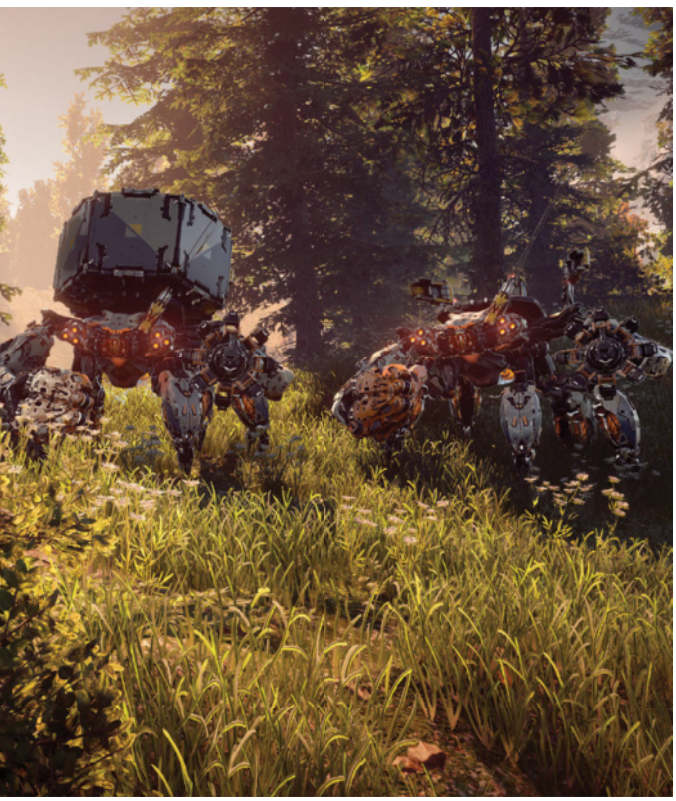
HORIZON: ZERO DAWN IS TERRIFYING AND BEAUTIFUL

GUERRILLA'S OPEN WORLD IS STUFFED FULL OF AWESOME ROBOT MONSTER ACTION

Format: PS4 **Origin:** Netherlands **Publisher:** SCE **Developer:** Guerrilla Games **Release:** 1 March 2017 **Players:** 1

THE MORE YOU see of this world, with its mighty robo-inhabitants, the more excited you get. Guerrilla has just gone to town with creativity here, creating a glorious open world with a stunning colour palette. Any fears that we may have had of it being something of a beautiful yet ultimately dull experience have been brightly quashed. Expect camps to hang out in, people to talk to, and plenty a side-quests to take you running off into the savage wilderness. The post-apocalyptic world comes with plenty of hidden extras to find, including a dialogue tree to let you really dig deeper into the story, if you're the type to enjoy a digital novel.

"AS WE'RE LOOKING AT A ROBOTIC ENEMY HERE, IT'S GOT A PLETHORA OF WEAPONRY"



Within camp, you're going to be trading and selling goods, no surprises there. But how do you buy and sell with no formal currency? Well, you'll be collecting shards, bits and pieces from the husks of your victims, varying in quality depending on the enemy. Although, you might start to find that you don't hugely get on with too many people; the post-apocalyptic world is "corrupted", and your tribe's decision is pretty much to ignore it. Aloy, however, the super impressive archer-warrior protagonist, wants to go and investigate the mythical gods, whom the tribe believe can solve all their problems.

Of course, you might want to actually listen to them; it's a terrifying world out there. Have you seen how huge the creatures are? We promise you they're even more intimidating up close and personal. That said, what kind of wild adventurer would you be if you just stayed at home? An adventure it is, then. The first step is strength: to increase your power, you'll have to hunt your enemies for those valuable shards and materials, which is no mean feat.

Luckily for you, Aloy can scan the environment and work out the paths of some of the not so intelligent machine lifeforms. You can even "convince" some of the wildlife into being a mount for you. These slower creatures march around in small groups and carry valuables onboard their armour. If you can manage to lure one away from the pack, then they can be very useful, dropping hot loot and even information of the whereabouts of possible "corruption". The world really isn't safe to traverse on foot – it takes bloody ages – so you should make the most of any moments you get to grab a ride. It works as a good way to see the sights of the world too, riding past some even bigger creatures which, early on, you will absolutely need to stay well clear of.

Which moves us on nicely to the boss-like enemy we encountered. Assaulted by a miffed, scorpion-like goliath, there's no chance we were going to take this thing down with just a bow and a knife (even though our bow does have explosive rounds and can slow down time). Taking it on from our newly persuaded mount really doesn't help our predicament, but what seems impossible is perfectly doable, with enough practice, the right kind of weaponry, and assessing the situation smartly.

As we're looking at a robotic enemy here, it's got a plethora of weaponry to choose from in its attempt to destroy us, from firing projectiles at us, or trying to laser-beam off our face. This mechanical beast goes hell for leather and decides it wants to rip up the ground around us as well. We're a little disappointed to see some weak points indicated with a glow; the rest of the experience seems so fluid and engaging that this really does snap you back out into 'Oh, it's just a videogame' territory. Still, our spirit picks up when we realise that while we could wait for it to fail structurally, we might be better off trying to outwit the machine with our tools.

At this stage, we're not strong enough to rip it limb from limb, but we *can* pin each individual appendage to the ground with a phenomenally useful grappling hook. Each pin slowly crippling it, we then saw it wincing with pain, and that's when we realised that *Horizon: Zero Dawn* might be our new favourite game.

FREE MOVEMENT

Watch Dogs' concrete jungle has been replaced with a beautiful, varied landscape in San Francisco's Bay Area. Marcus Holloway will be able to move across it freely, making use of parkour to traverse rooftops and buildings. It already looks great – more intuitive and fluid than *Assassin's Creed*'s similar movement systems.

PLAYER CHOICE

You dictate how your hacktivist operates in *Watch Dogs 2*. You can avoid killing anybody if you are so inclined, rampage around the Bay area, or even use ctOS 2.0 to your advantage by manipulating individual records to get the cops involved if you want to avoid an altercation altogether.

THE HERO

Aiden Pearce's lack of character was an issue for many in *Watch Dogs*, and so Ubisoft has gone in almost the opposite direction. With a more believable personality, from his motivations to his fashion sense, Marcus Holloway seems like a real character that we actually want to spend time with.

DRONE ASSISTANCE

Marcus can whip out a personal drone at any time, increasing his awareness and versatility in combat. The drone can be used to scout locations, pick up items and objects or used to incite agitated NPCs into conflict. These can all be upgraded, along with your weapons, via your advanced 3D printer.

HUGE VARIETY

Watch Dogs 2 features a wide array of hacks, each with their own deep systems attached giving you full control. You can hack infrastructures (the city itself), hack every vehicle and AI character; there are mass hacks (AI Distractions, Communications, Traffic) and even RC hacking for environments and gadgets.

START A REVOLUTION IN **WATCH DOGS 2**

HOW YOU CAN HACK THE BAY AREA TO THE GROUND

Format: PS4, PC, Xbox One **Origin:** Canada **Publisher:** Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal **Release:** 15 November 2016 **Players:** TBC

UBISOFT HAS GOT to be one of the most erratic studios in the gaming universe. Just look at *Watch Dogs 2*. It couldn't be any further removed from its sombre predecessor if it wanted to be, but given the nature of how it operates, it's difficult to know which iteration of Ubisoft is pulling the strings behind the polygons. Is *Watch Dogs 2* the work of a studio that has a habit of promising the world and catastrophically failing to deliver – the hangmen that presided over *The Crew* and certain *Assassin's Creed* entries in years past? Or are we getting the Ubi that seems eager to challenge perception, to innovate and redefine whatever genre it touches – the visionaries responsible for guiding *The Division* and *Rainbow Six: Siege*?

At first glance, all seems positive. It's difficult not to be immediately dragged into the chaotic spectacle of *Watch Dogs 2*. It's hypnotically boisterous, defiantly confident and looks to be genuinely innovating in the open world space. Ubisoft is taking the franchise to San Francisco to focus on a new story, new mechanics and, integrally, an all-new character – one armed with powerful hacking abilities designed to give players complete control over their experience.

"We listened to what the fans had to say following *Watch Dogs 1*," says returning creative director Jonathan Morin, noting that the team spent months scouring forums for feedback as it approached a sequel. "We are pushing for deeper hacking gameplay where players can really feel like they can think outside the box to solve their problems... We want players to feel like hackers who are hacking the game to win, manipulating people for their own benefits, turning factions against each other, disrupting traffic with great control or [doing] entire missions without even moving by just hacking remotely."

Leaving Chicago and Aiden Pearce behind doesn't seem to have been a difficult decision for Ubisoft. »

> "PLAYERS CAN DECIDE HOW THEY APPROACH EACH SITUATION. BECOMING EITHER THE AGGRESSOR, THE GHOST OR THE TRICKSTER HACKER"
> **JONATHAN MORIN, CREATIVE DIRECTOR**

» The City by the Bay is such a natural fit for the franchise it's a wonder *Watch Dogs* didn't plant its flag here to begin with, creating a world that revolves around the intellect and tech knowledge of characters that grew up embedded in Silicon Valley.

"The San Francisco Bay Area represents the birthplace of the tech revolution," says Morin. "It is a hacker paradise with a specific state of mind. The San Francisco Bay Area brings something entirely fresh since it's less about surveillance and a lot more about the new economy of information, data mining, and advanced analytics."

Given *Watch Dogs*' obsession with exploring the social anxiety behind today's surveillance culture, it's likely the mention of "economy of information, data mining and advanced analytics" doesn't get the gaming juices flowing. But the appeal of *Watch Dogs 2* directly stems out of new protagonist Marcus Holloway, a born and raised Oakland hacker who's as immediately charming as he is socially skilled – a total about turn from Pearce's broody brand of trench coat justice.

"Marcus is a young, brilliant hacker who grew up in Oakland and experienced the injustices of the ctOS 2.0 system first hand. Now he wants to break the system wide open and give a second chance to the people who the system has wronged," notes senior writer Lucien Soulban, presenting Holloway as a young guy who begins his journey with hacker group Dedsec after being mistakenly profiled in the city he loves. "He knows people's rights and privacy are being trampled. At first it's personal, he wants to stop the surveillance and collection of data, but after a while, it's not just about what happened to him but what's happening to everyone. It's about what comes next and stopping that from happening."

Unlike the worlds seen in *The Division* and *Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft isn't trying to build a 1:1 scale recreation of California's Bay Area. Instead, it's creating a theme park of sorts, dividing the Bay Area into six regions – Downtown, Civic, Coast, Oakland, Marin and Silicon Valley – equalling "46 neighbourhoods with unique artistic signatures and distinctive aesthetic flavours," as art director Mathieu Leduc says. "Not only does it represent the birthplace of the tech revolution, but San Francisco is influential for trends in art, music and architecture. The Bay Area's neighbourhoods and its people are as diverse as they are fascinating."

> "YOU CAN HACK EVERY PERSON WALKING AROUND OR EVEN CHANGE THEIR PROFILE TO MANIPULATE THEM INDIRECTLY"
> **DANNY BELANGER, GAME DIRECTOR**

The city might not be accurate to its real world counterpart, but that's alright by us – it's looking alive, dense and packed with opportunities to utilise *Watch Dogs 2*'s new systems, structure and mechanics. This is where the ambitions of the game begin to come sharply into focus; if Ubisoft is actually able to deliver on its promises here – on the early gameplay we've already seen – then traditional open world adventure design convention is in for a rude awakening.

Watch Dogs 2 is looking to break the feeling that an open world is centred on us, the player. It's achieving this by making monumental upgrades to AI routines. Interactions between NPCs will happen independently of you; each character you see has their own personality, secrets and most importantly, motivation. The original *Watch Dogs* promised something similar, though it looks as if the sequel may fully deliver. It's an important realisation for the studio, because Holloway is able to hack and manipulate essentially *everything* in the world.

"Much like in the first *Watch Dogs*, the player can hack into the city infrastructure," says Danny Belanger, game director on *Watch Dogs 2*. "You can hack every person walking around or even change their profile to manipulate them indirectly. You can get anyone arrested, distracted or even attacked. You can remote hack every car in the city to make them accelerate, steer or reverse at will. You can remote control lifts and cranes and start to be creative with physics. You can use your jumper drone to incite people and see if things will escalate... every single player will find a weapon to suit their taste and mood."

Essentially, intrusion is being upgraded so it's no longer based around the 'Press X to hack' simplicity of the original design. *Watch Dogs 2* is centred around player choice in a fashion that we rarely see in games – it has as much potential to falter as it does succeed, but we can't help but been intrigued by the ambition. The more we see of *Watch Dogs 2*, the more we are beginning to question whether it's about to have its own *Assassin's Creed* moment – *ACII* famously surpassed a predecessor that was critically condemned for having big ideas but failing to execute them as promised, it's difficult not to draw a comparison here.

Player choice permeates throughout the entire experience, extending past the huge breadth of hacking options (and the depth of the

■ An enhanced 3D printer will let Marcus craft everything from disposable drones to weapon upgrades, while online self-defence videos also helps Marcus create a thunderball – a cue ball attached to a length of paracord for melee encounters.

■ Below: While *Watch Dogs 2* doesn't feature an accurate, 1:1 depiction of San Francisco, it does feature many of the main hubs in an effort to capture the unique feel and flavour of the city. Right: The future of communication in the 21 Century, Wrench displays reactions and emotions through an emoji-emitting face mask. The internet already loves him.

MULTIPLAYER EVOLUTION

BUILDING A BELIEVABLE OPEN WORLD

With so much effort put into creating an open world with no boundaries, Ubisoft is updating *Watch Dogs*' (incredibly fun) PvP in an intuitive way. Much like *The Division*, single-player and co-operative experiences are colliding, and it looks like a perfect fit for a game centred around building a following and connecting with other Dedsec members to topple *the man*.

"*Watch Dogs 2* is building on the seamless online developed in *Watch Dogs 1*. Now all the online experiences of the game are seamlessly integrated with the single player: no loading, no menus, nor cuts in experience," promises returning senior producer Dominic Guay, explaining how you'll come across friends in the open world before being able to pair up and cause mischief together. "We are improving on the best competitive experiences of *Watch Dogs 1* but also adding friendly encounters with other Dedsec hackers in the city. You can join up with those other players as a coop team to challenge the corrupted establishment together."

manipulation) available. You'll have the ability to shape your own adventure and Ubisoft has already promised that you'll be able to finish the entire game non-lethally should you feel so inclined. You can fine-tune Marcus into whatever kind of 'hacktivist' that you want him to be: violent and unforgiving or passive and stealthy, it's up to you.

"Regardless of how [players] play, the game will not judge them, letting them decide how far Dedsec is willing to go to take back control," teases Morin. "Players can decide how they approach each situation. They can invest on the skills and tools they want to become either the aggressor, the ghost or the trickster hacker... this freedom of action is what characterises a systemic open world."

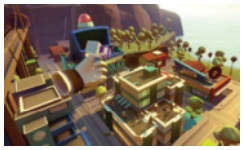
Ubisoft Montreal's intention is to drive player choice into the core design of *Watch Dogs 2*'s structure and narrative. It's designed to be 'open' from the start, letting you tackle any mission in any order – you can even shy away from things you aren't interested in entirely as you create your own narrative. There is no set critical path, instead Marcus is completing operations to gain 'followers' in Dedsec through notoriety – ultimately, once you've accumulated enough power and presence on the streets you'll be able to push towards the end-game objective.

Watch Dogs 2 is a huge statement of intent for Ubisoft, a clear and defiant response to criticisms aimed at its predecessor. Whether the open structure will be engaging enough to keep us hooked throughout remains to be seen, but we can't help but be excited by the prospect of it all. *Watch Dogs 2* is aiming to deliver everything we wanted from the original and more – and it's doing it in the most flippant, charming and arrogant fashion imaginable.

OXYGEN NOT INCLUDED

From the makers of *Don't Starve* and *Invisible, Inc* comes *Oxygen Not Included*, a colony simulation game set in space from Klei Entertainment. Much like *Don't Starve*, players will need to work diligently to keep people alive by supplying them with food, water, warmth and (obviously) oxygen. Nobody said building a base on an asteroid would be easy, and this is likely to be one hell of a challenge.

GIANT COP



Quickly proving itself as one of the most entertaining VR games in development, *Giant Cop* transforms you into a gigantic cop presiding over Metro City. Using your ridiculous size the idea is to tower over the citizens and prevent crime by getting your hands dirty. Stop crime by throwing criminals into the sea or take a softer touch, it's up to you.

TYRANNY

When Obsidian sticks its name to a game, you pretty much know what you're going to get. A branching narrative, a strong sense of story and – of course – challenging RPG combat. *Tyranny* offers all of this and more, and it's looking brilliant. Due for release later this year, it can't be missed by any RPG fan.

STAR TREK: BRIDGE CREW

Have you ever dreamed of becoming captain of the Enterprise? Do you also happen to have a *ton* of money? Then *Star Trek: Bridge Crew* is perfect! Placing you and your friends directly on the bridge of a Star Trek cruiser, it's one of those games that's perfect for virtual reality. While it looks a little ropey, it's still a dream come true.

THE TURING TEST

From the studio that brought you *Pneuma: Breath Of Life*, *The Turing Test* is one of those indie puzzle games that revels in making you think, not just about the challenges in front of you, mind, but on some of life's larger questions. While linear in gameplay, *The Turing Test* already looks much improved over Bulkhead's previous work.

While similar to regular Fallen in appearance, SIVA-enhanced splicers will have plenty of new tricks to make them feel like a brand new enemy force, much like the Taken before them.

FORGING A NEW ERA IN **DESTINY: RISE OF IRON**

HOW BUNGIE IS LOOKING TO REFRESH THE GAME AS WE HEAD INTO YEAR THREE

Format: Xbox One, PS4 **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** Activision **Developer:** Bungie **Release:** 20 September 2016 **Players:** MMO

1 A FOURTH RAID

Destiny is sat on a pretty nice hit-rate with Raids at the moment – Vault Of Glass and King's Fall are both excellent, while Crota's End had some neat ideas, even if it is primarily run by brave solo players more than Fireteams these days. For its next trick, Bungie is ditching the usual corridors and catacombs for a vibrant outdoor setting, a welcome change of scenery for endgame content. Expect giant bosses that require full team coordination and most likely another infuriating jump puzzle

2 NEW/ALTERED STRIKES

While the initial reveal mentioned just a single new Strike, we'll actually be getting a fair bit more than that. The new wave of Fallen enemies, enhanced by SIVA nanotechnology, will also appear in variants of older Strikes – The Devil's Lair and Fallen S.A.B.E.R. being (Sepiks) prime candidates – just as the Taken were retrofitted into old content in the last expansion to mix things up. PS4 players can also expect additional content as Activision's ongoing deal with Sony continues into Year Three.

3 AN AXE TO GRIND

In the reveal trailer, we see Iron Banner overseer Saladin swinging a huge flaming axe around. The good news is that you'll be able to do the same, should you so desire – like the Scorch Cannons added in *House Of Wolves*, these are temporary weapons that can be picked up and used without being equipped into regular gear slots. We imagine this will also have a part to play in the new Raid, as other such 'relics' typically have had.

4 INCREASED LIGHT LEVEL

While Bungie hasn't yet confirmed exactly what the new cap will be, the increase has been described as 'significant' – given that recent Light hikes have typically been around 15-20 and the current cap is 335, a greater jump would most likely see us shooting for a maximum somewhere between 360 and 400. Hopefully the team won't mess with the current Infusion system, as going back to partial improvement rather than full transferal of Light from material to target gear would be a grind-inducing step backwards that would incite the player base.

5 MORE PVP CONTENT

Given that the Iron Lords are primarily mentioned and referenced in the multiplayer Iron Banner events, it's no surprise that there should be interesting things going on in the Crucible now they're being made integral to the story. The biggest of these is a whole new mode [will add more details after reveal] but expect significant adjustments elsewhere as well, just like we see alongside every major content drop.

6 GJALLARHORN IS BACK

The must-have gun of Destiny's first year (literally – owning it was a requirement for joining many LFG groups) makes its anticipated return, and there's no RNG involved in getting one this time. Like other recent Exotics, it will instead be the reward at the end of a new quest line that sees Guardians forge their very own Gjally. Don't expect it to be quite the content-trivialising beast it once was, however – Bungie isn't foolish enough to just give out a Win Button like that...

Even with a whole new array of special moves and attacks at your disposal, head-on confrontations are best avoided. Emily Kaldwin and Corvo Attano aren't blessed with reserves of health.

THE STUNNING VARIETY OF STEALTH IN **DISHONORED 2**

ARKANE'S LATEST ISN'T JUST ABOUT HIDING IN THE SHADOWS

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** France **Publisher:** Bethesda Softworks **Developer:** Arkane Studios **Release:** 11 November 2016 **Players:** 1

Stealth gameplay has a tendency to be interpreted in a pretty narrow way, but that's not the case with *Dishonored 2*. While using cover, high vantage points and shadows remain a linchpin of the experience, the way that Arkane is opening up new, sometimes mind-bending stealth concepts is one of the most exciting and mysterious things about its sequel. Let us break it down for you...

STEALTH THROUGH TIME TRAVEL

Arkane has shown off a mission entitled A Crack In The Slab in which you are able to use a device to travel back and forth through time within an abandoned manor. Using this mechanic, you can travel around the location without disturbance in the current time and traverse ruined areas in the past. What's more, with the help of a device that shows you the other timeline on some glass, you can perform stealth kills by hopping in and out of the past. It's a stunning new idea.

STEALTH THROUGH WEATHER

Karnaca is *Dishonored 2*'s primary location and it's a very different environment to Dunwall. One sign of this is the dust storms that affect one particular district. While it greatly reduces your ability to see and find vantage points, it also affects the line of sight of your enemies, so when a storm sweeps in, it's a great chance to sneak up on people and take them out without getting spotted.

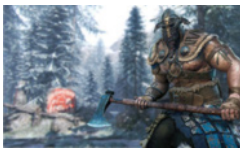
STEALTH THROUGH MAGIC

Having been marked by the Outsider, Corvo was blessed/cursed with a number of mysterious abilities and Emily is given her own set of strange and unique moves. The most interesting is her equivalent to Blink, called Shadow Walk. Emily can use this ability to sneak across the floor in smoke form, grasping and clawing at the environment as she goes, even attacking enemies in this form. It's a fascinating new skill that only she can use.

STEALTH WITHOUT POWERS

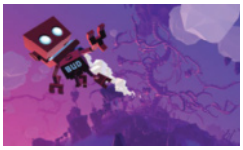
In a great piece of news for gamers who like to punish themselves, Arkane is adding a mode called 'Flesh and Steel', which deactivates all of your supernatural powers and means you have to survive the world of *Dishonored 2* on your wits and weapons alone. This is likely to be the way of playing the game that the more hardcore among us will push ourselves to complete, whatever it takes.

FOR HONOR



Ubisoft recently took the time to show off a little of *For Honor*'s single-player campaign mode and frankly we're still very much of the opinion that the game doesn't need one. The online multiplayer side of this tactical sword-fighting experience remains so much more compelling to us. Our enthusiasm remains high, but we may only play half of what *For Honor* ends up offering.

GROW UP



It's surprising to find that *Grow Home* has garnered enough love that it would justify such a speedy sequel, but then a fun mascot and calming gameplay can go a long way. Mechanically, this game was already solid, so opening it up to an entire planet you can explore and interact with seems like a smart move. If it can maintain its winning charm and add a little more depth this could be a really special follow-up to a solid opening title.

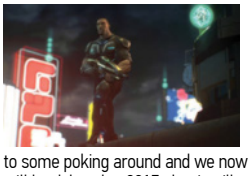
BOUND

We wouldn't have thought that VR game involving 3D platforming with a character that moves like a ballet dancer would grab our attention so firmly, but *Bound* is quite eye-catching. With motion capture movement performed by real dancer Maria Udod, *Bound*'s art style, movement and music combine to make a mysterious and enticing new experience.

DAYS GONE

Zombie games show no sign of slowing down, but as long as they look as cool as this PS4 exclusive from the team behind the Uncharted Vita titles, we're fine with that. Hundreds of zombies appear to have infested this world, and will swarm you if you catch their attention. Comparisons have been made to *The Last Of Us*, but this looks more action-focused than Naughty Dog's title.

CRACKDOWN 3



Since Microsoft didn't show *Crackdown 3* at E3 this year there hasn't been a mass of new info about, but its absence led to some poking around and we now know that the game will be delayed to 2017, that it will support cross-play between Xbox One and PC, and that the beta test we had hoped for this summer is more likely to be Q4 2016/Q1 2017. A shame, but the ideas here deserve time.

FINAL FANTASY XV IS READY FOR BATTLE

ALAS, THE WAIT IS REAL

Format: PS4, Xbox One **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Square Enix
Developer: In-house **Release:** 30 September **Players:** 1

IT'S FAIR TO say that *FFXV*'s combat has come on a fair way since the original *Episode Duscae* demo. Back then, there was no magic, no real meaningful interaction with allies and barely any depth to the swordplay. All of that has improved greatly with each new reveal, though, and the latest feature to be added has pleased many franchise fans who thought the *Kingdom Hearts*-esque action combat was a stretch further than they were comfortable with – Wait mode is back, and it's even more useful than ever.

While the original ATB version of Wait mode would kick in as soon as it was your turn to act, here it's something that is triggered manually. While the action is frozen, you can trigger actions for both Noctis and his bros, effectively offering the kind of control over the full party it always felt like we were missing before. The rest of the gang will still act independently during action, but this simply means you needn't wait and hope for a heal or an Esuna at a critical moment – you can make sure it happens. This pause for breath also allows for more accurate aiming of spells, although frozen time won't last forever so you still need to be fairly quick with your decisions and plays.

It's great to see Square reacting to feedback every step of the way, but let's hope that's it for new features and announcements for now. With only a few months left until launch, there's evidently still a fair amount of optimisation to be done and if there's one thing *Final Fantasy* games don't tend to lack, it's polish.

Who needs an airship when you can have a flying car? We dread to think how much Cindy's going to charge for this customized ride.

Above: Environmental takedowns are looking pretty brutal for a character that takes non-fatal combat so seriously. Hopefully the computer consoles and junction boxes are all low voltage.

PREY PUTS THE FEAR BACK INTO SCI-FI

ARKANE DELIVERS AFTER A DECADE IN DEVELOPMENT HELL

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** Bethesda
Developer: Arkane Studios **Release:** 2017 **Players:** TBC

IT ISN'T CLEAR why Bethesda elected to resurrect the *Prey* IP, but we sure are happy about it. Our first glimpse into its world – presented by *Dishonored* developer Arkane – revealed a completely new direction for the franchise. That's a necessary step after the brand spent the better part of a decade hidden away.

And now it's looking like a sickeningly slick blend of *System Shock*, *Dead Space* and *The Thing*, a psychological horror *Groundhog Day* where mysterious space station experiments seem to lead protagonist Morgan to relive the same harrowing cycle of drinking disgusting coffee and shotgunning alien creatures on loop. Of course, there's more than meets the eye here – a potentially sore subject considering he seems to be bleeding out from chemical exposure – and we'd expect nothing less from the combined efforts of Arkane and famed former Obsidian Games designer Chris Avellone. Nothing is quite as it seems – and this will work well with the huge, multi-tiered, player-led open spaces that *Dishonored* is known for.

Bethesda has assured us that Arkane has 'broken the franchise down to its core concept' though we are seeing very little of that here. The original, largely overlooked when it released in 2006, was focused around a Cherokee gunslinger battling through an alien spaceship, using supernatural abilities and portals to alter the tide of battle, so perhaps it's for the best it gets forgotten. With the *BioShock*, *Dead Space* and *System Shock* franchises all MIA, we're desperate for a fluid, violent and challenging sci-fi game – here's hoping *Prey* can fill the void.

Prey will run on the same upgraded id Tech 5 engine that powered the likes of *Wolfenstein: The Old Blood*, *The Evil Within* and, of course, *Dishonored 2*. It's bound to look gorgeous, basically.

KATSUHIRO HARADA ON THE NEXT GENERATION OF **TEKKEN**

WILL THE FIRST 3D FIGHTER ON NEW CONSOLES BE THE LAST FOR THE MISHIMA BLOODLINE?

Format: Arcade, PS4, Xbox One **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Bandai Namco **Developer:** In-house **Release:** Q1 2017 **Players:** 1-2 (2-TBC online)

Obviously Bandai Namco and Capcom have a very tight relationship, but what went into choosing just one guest character for *Tekken 7*? What ultimately led you to Akuma, other than him fitting so well into the story?

It goes back to *Tekken X Street Fighter*. We were working on that and the idea of Akuma came up early on. We thought it would be a cool way to blend the story; not just bringing these characters in but including them in the story of the game, and Akuma as you mentioned fits easily. Akuma came early in our considerations and we had already consulted [*Street Fighter* head Yoshinori] Ono-san about this like four years ago. We got the OK from him back then, and it's something we've been thinking about since then.

Could the inclusion of Akuma here lead into a possible story arc for *Tekken X Street Fighter*?

Nothing we can talk about at the moment – *Tekken X Street Fighter* is on hold as we focus on *Tekken 7* and try to make it a success. There's nothing really going on with *Tekken x Street Fighter* right now.

Is there one particular new character that you find yourself personally going back to over and over again as you playtest?

Shaheen for me, as I wanted to check the balance of the character since he's said to be very strong but we don't see him taking top places in tournaments in Japan. He's a character that many people say is too strong, so we have to continually go back and make sure he's not too strong.

***Tekken* is often seen as a PlayStation franchise, as that's where it started. Did you choose Xbox at E3 to let Xbox players know you were coming or was there another reason?**

As you say, the image with PlayStation is strong, but back with *Tekken 6* we did do 360 because the market was so large for that console. We couldn't really neglect that audience, and this time is kind of similar. There was a lot of requests from the fans to see an Xbox One release, we hadn't announced it up until now, and if you look at the Xbox One it doesn't really have a lot of fighting games at the moment so we wanted to give players that option for their console.

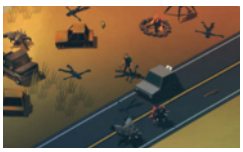
GRAVITY RUSH 2

Mere confirmation that the game is still on course for release later this year will do for the time being. While it looks to be much the same brand of tumbling through the sky and manipulating gravity to swoop around abstract cityscapes, the new system of being able to control the strength of gravity adds a greater degree of freedom and potential.

STATE OF DECAY 2

Built around the concept of cooperation – either with other characters within your community when playing solo or other players – you'll have to work together, strong group dynamics leading to a better chance of staying alive while internal conflict may make survival that bit more challenging. The original was a little sketchy on console, so let's hope that Play Anywhere support will mean this can get close to PC/Xbox One parity.

OVERLAND

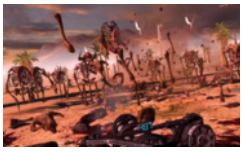


With procedurally-generated road maps and contained isometric maps for each event or encounter along the way, *Overland* allows you to manage a journey through the end of the world, creating a curious contrast with the overwhelming odds against actual long-term survival. It's currently in its own version of Early Access on PC, Mac and Linux via itch.io.

OBSERVER

While its forerunner *Layers Of Fear* seemed like it was created with the express intention of clogging up the internet with even more videos of idiots fake-screaming at obvious jump scares, this cyberpunk follow-up seems to have a little bit more going on. It's more psychological, investigating the idea of nightmares being hacked to exploit people's fears.

SERIOUS SAM VR



The switch from chaotic sprinting and leaping amid hordes of enemies to a static turret-like style of play didn't sit well with us to begin with, but we changed our minds the moment we found ourselves in familiar settings staring down headless suicide bombers and skeletal horse things. Even without movement, the intensity of the series remains intact, as does its over-the-top weapons and foes.

5 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT **DEATH STRANDING**

THERE'S MORE TO FIND OUT ABOUT HIDEO KOJIMA'S PS4 EXCLUSIVE THAN YOU MIGHT THINK

Format: PS4 **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Kojima Productions **Release:** TBC 2018 **Players:** 1

1 IT WILL BE AN ACTION GAME (SORT OF)

Hideo Kojima has been making it clear that players should be expecting an action game in the tradition of the Metal Gear Solid series, but not a stealth game. In fact he's drawn comparisons to how he feels MGS only came to be known as 'stealth' after the fact as people found a label for it. He claims *Death Stranding* will be similarly innovative and may need new categorisation as a result.

2 IT'S ALL ABOUT STICKS AND ROPES

Inspired by author Kōbō Abe, Kojima has been talking about humankind's first invention being the stick, a tool and weapon, and the second being the rope, something that ties things together and connects us. Images of the umbilical cord in the *Death Stranding* teaser speak to that theme of connecting, while those futuristic handcuffs offer a different interpretation as something that binds us.

3 CETACEAN STRANDING IS A REAL-WORLD OCCURRENCE

While the term 'stranding' might be taken to mean to connecting via strands between people, it is also the phenomena of sea life becoming stranded on beaches. The scenes of animal life lying dead in the *Death Stranding* trailer are pretty consistent of images of cetacean stranding, while the appearance of a black, oil-like substance also brings to mind environmental disasters such as oil slicks, which can often cause the death of sea life.

4 IT WILL BE APPROACHING IN-GAME DEATH IN A NEW WAY

In a quote posted by Kojima Production's official English Twitter feed, @KojiPro2015_EN, Kojima spoke a little about the way games have treated death since the earliest days of the medium; "From the days of coin-operated games have had a continue option if you were to fail at your mission. Failing would also mean the death of your game character. In making a game, both in story and in the game system you depict death. However, 'death' is about to have a new meaning." It's a cryptic message, but a very intriguing one.

5 BLACK HOLES MAY PLAY A PART

From the moment the *Death Stranding* teaser was revealed, Kojima fans began poring over the footage; Kojima teasing that, "The game has already begun" adding fuel to the fire. One big find is that the pendants around Norman Reedus' neck in the trailer feature mathematical equations. Namely the Schwarzschild radius and the Dirac equation, which relate to our understanding of the formation and behaviour of black holes. This points pretty heavily towards a science fiction setting.

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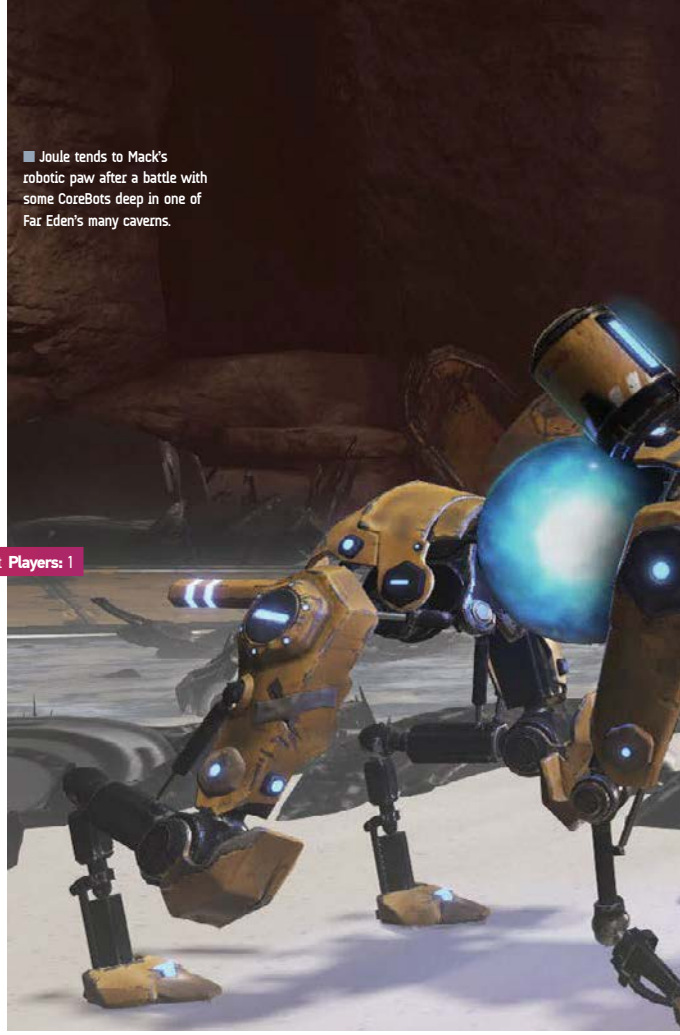
THE AMAZING CREATIVITY OF **RECORE** REVEALED

INAFUNE AND ARMATURE STUDIOS TEAM UP FOR AN EPIC STORY IN A BRAND NEW WORLD

Format: Xbox One, Windows 10, PS4 **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Microsoft **Developer:** Comcept/Armature Studios **Release:** 13 Sept **Players:** 1



Joule tends to Mack's robotic paw after a battle with some CoreBots deep in one of Far Eden's many caverns.

IN AN ALTERNATE future, Earth is rendered uninhabitable. A group of survivors set out to find a new world, eventually landing on a desert planet of wind and sand known as Far Eden. Far Eden is supposed to become the new human paradise, a world where the troubled race can once again flourish, but one explorer called Joule wakes from a centuries-long stasis to find that nothing has gone as it should. She must then set out into the world, using companions known as CoreBots to figure out exactly what went wrong. That is *ReCore* in a nutshell, and it's looking fascinating from what we've seen so far, starting with the colour-based combat system.

Each enemy robot in the world glows with one of four colours of light: red, blue, yellow, or white. Joule's blaster rifle can change to one of these four colours on the fly, and matching colours results in maximum damage being dealt to the enemy. Some enemies can change colours in the middle of battle and Joule must keep up in order to properly dispatch them. Aiming at the enemies will not be an issue however, as the designated Aim button makes Joule automatically focus on one enemy and allows the player to concentrate on matching the colours.

When Joule is not engaged in battle against rogue CoreBots, she's using the services of her own team of robots to traverse the hostile world and solve puzzles. The robot dog called Mack the Explorer, the spider-legged speedster Seth the Escape Artist, and the gorilla-esque Duncan the Heavy Hitter can all join Joule as she explores, each one activated by the blue core powering it. The world of Far Eden is sometimes just as intriguing as the characters themselves, with branching paths scattered throughout its desert wastes.

These robots will be key to Joule successfully manoeuvring through the harsh worlds of Far Eden. At one point we seemed to be stuck too far below the platform we had to reach, but by sending Seth climbing up the wall with his spider legs we could target and latch onto him with our grapple hook. In another area we needed to locate a power cell in order to open a door in front of us, and we sent Mack digging through the surrounding area to see if it was buried underground. Sure enough, after a few seconds of digging the power cell appeared and we could move on.

While a brief moment of exploration was highlighted, what we've played so far has been focused primarily on the combat system, which really did not do the game justice; we're just itching to go and explore this world properly. While there's nothing inherently wrong with the way *ReCore* approaches combat, other than switching between colours there's not a whole lot to it. Aiming is a non-issue thanks to the auto lock-on Aim button, and then it's just holding the Fire button until the rogue CoreBot blows up. Sometimes we can use the grapple hook to pull the cores out of the machines, which are then used as currency for upgrades and new equipment, but even with that added element it's simply point-and-shoot action. A perfect balance between exploration and combat is paramount to *ReCore*'s success, because without it the game could quickly become more of a chore than a fun ride.

> "COMCEPT AND ARMATURE STUDIOS HAVE A WILDLY CREATIVE CONCEPT IN RECORE, SET IN A HOSTILE WORLD FILLED WITH DERELICT TECHNOLOGY"

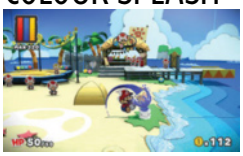
Keiji Inafune and the teams at Comcept and Armature Studios have a wildly creative concept here in *ReCore*, set in a hostile world filled with derelict technology waiting to be explored. The flashes of puzzle-solving included in the demo were interesting, but the focus on combat put a small dampener on the whole experience. If the teams can come together and balance out the game's objectives before the September release, they could have a smash hit on their hands.

Using her grappling hook, Joule can activate doors by pulling and turning their power cores. The hook is a vital weapon/tool in *ReCore*.

THE ENEMY BOTS OF FAR EDEN

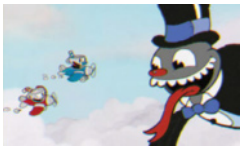
The CoreBots that stand in Joule's way come in many shapes and sizes, just like her robotic companions. First is a large hulking bot that runs on four legs and delivers massive damage up close, swinging his arms around and also periodically pounding the ground to produce a damaging shockwave effect. Next is a spider-like bot that prefers to keep its distance from Joule, finding higher ground before shooting at her from its protected spot. Finally came a robotic fly that often traveled in swarms, filling the screen with blasts and making Joule dodge frantically before getting a few shots in. If these are the creatures featured with what little we've seen so far, one can only wonder what awaits in the main game.

PAPER MARIO: COLOUR SPLASH



As you explore a tropical island you can collect paint and redistribute it to reconstruct objects drained of colour. Once again, Mario is playing the part of janitor, but it's a light, fun concept that adds exploration and puzzle depth plus the turn-based combat the series is known for.

CUPHEAD



The biggest news about *Cuphead* is that it's no longer the boss rush action game we once thought it might be, but rather a full platforming adventure with the same innovative and inventive boss battle as we've already seen. This comes as a very pleasant surprise as we had always thought that Studio MDHR's concept deserved the fuller exploration of a platform game, but wondered if the small team would ever find the time to pull it off.

BELOW

As we go to press Capybara's much-anticipated roguelike is still expected to launch this summer, but exactly when remains unclear. What is clear is that the sense of scale and insecurity that the game is looking to engender is as strong as ever. Capybara remains on a strong run of launches and *Below* still promises to be the deepest and most complex yet.

PERSONA 5

Persona is one of those Japanese RPG series that oddly seems to sit on the knife-edge of whether it will or will not get a western translation and yet we love it. It's one of the most vibrant and inventive role-players out there and this one looks like an amazing new entry as well as a great starting point for anyone looking to join us this bizarre, twisted world.

FLINTHOOK

From the team behind *Mercenary Kings*, *Flinthook* was long teased as something akin to having Spider-Man with a gun. Inspired by recent roguelikes, you must lead Captain Flinthook around stages, using a hookshot to swing around, tear shields from enemies and generally look awesome. Procedural generation rounds off the experience, which promise plenty of combat depth for such a simple concept.

While missions can be tackled by utilising stealth, tactical efficiency or running and gunning approaches, the AI seems to react in the same way every time. Using stealth seems to be wildly inefficient use of your time.

CAN **GHOST RECON: WILDLANDS** CONQUER THE OPEN WORLD?

DOES UBISOFT'S LATEST HAVE THE GAMEPLAY TO MATCH ITS SCALE?

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC **Origin:** France **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Developer:** Ubisoft Paris **Release:** 7 March 2017 **Players:** 1-4

THERE'S LITTLE ARGUMENT to be made against *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*' credentials. It's without question one of the most visually arresting videogames shown off this year, with Ubisoft's open-world interpretation of a drug-ravaged Bolivia immediately impressing all that see it. It's the largest space the publisher has ever commissioned, a sprawling web of tall mountains, dense jungles, and harsh stretches of desert that combine to create ten distinct regions; the scale and spectacle of it all is, well, spectacular. A grounded, modern environment that immediately indicates a change in style, weaponry and pace to *Wildlands* when compared to its most recent (more futuristic) predecessors.

Ubisoft Paris is doubling down on the publisher's commitment to fostering friendships on the battlefield, with *Wildlands* featuring drop-in/drop-out co-op for up to four players, a huge variety of land, air and sea vehicles to take command of across the world and a design that's open enough to let you tackle missions however you see fit. With ten cartel lieutenants – not to mention Bolivia's own king of crime, El Sueño – all begging for execution, such freedom isn't just welcome, it's necessary.

As you've no doubt noticed in the past, Ubisoft has a habit of reusing and re-purposing many mechanics, systems and design elements across games under its umbrella. So you may be wondering whether *Wildlands* would be little more than *The Division*'s co-op and cover-based shooting mechanics jumbled together with *Far Cry*'s beautiful systemic open world design, right? *Wildlands* isn't this; in fact, it isn't much of anything right now. *Wildlands* doesn't have the core-gameplay loop or mechanics to match its ambitious open world. Combat isn't nearly as satisfying as the lengthy gameplay videos released so far would seem to suggest, with weightless weapons and poor audio/visual feedback leaving *Wildlands* feeling a little hollow.

Classically, the gameplay of the Ghost Recon series, even through its numerous iterations, is synonymous with tactics and realism. Both – at least in this alpha build – seem to have been abandoned. *Wildlands* is all sizzle and no steak, appearing to be closer to a third-person *Far Cry* than a game befitting the Tom Clancy branding. There's no cover system in place, pushing for gameplay around a run-and-gun playstyle – the most tactical manoeuvre the highly trained Ghost Recon operative can harness is the ability to drop into a prone position. With the game positioned for release in March 2017, we have little doubt that tightening up the shooting mechanics and gameplay loop will be a top priority for Ubisoft Paris. But right now *Wildlands*' gameplay doesn't support the ambitious open design.

GETTING ADVENTUROUS WITH **SCALEBOUND**

PLATINUM GAMES PROVES ONCE AND FOR ALL THAT FOUR DRAGONS ARE ALWAYS BETTER THAN ONE

Format: Xbox One, Windows 10 **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios **Developer:** Platinum Games **Release:** 2017 **Players:** 1-4

1 FULLY COOPERATIVE

There seems to have been some miscommunication surrounding *Scalebound*'s multiplayer. Famed game designer Hideki Kamiya has confirmed that co-op is indeed at the heart of the *Scalebound* experience, though partnering up with your buddies isn't just for the ridiculous boss battles; you can play the entire campaign with three other players if you wanted to. As Kamiya's first multiplayer game, this may bring new creative challenges to the fold, though everything we've seen so far looks to have been stamped with the Platinum seal of quality.

2 INCENTIVISING MULTIPLAYER

Platinum is eager to ensure *Scalebound* can be enjoyed in both single- and multiplayer capacities, though it will be looking to push adventurers together in two key ways. Not only will *Scalebound* feature no traditional lobby system – removing a huge barrier of entry for lazy gamers – but it'll also seek to reward players with unique items and gameplay experiences. As it stands, it seems as though the challenge of battles will scale to your ability, letting you and your pals focus on various specific mechanics of a boss to find victory.

3 CUSTOMISABLE DRAGONS

One of the coolest aspects of *Scalebound*, regardless of whether you're in single or multiplayer, will be customising your dragon. Everything from the armour, the skin, the horn and the element of your dragon's breath can evolve and change throughout play. Comparing and contrasting your variation of Thuban to that of your friends is bound to encourage competition, while ensuring your ground is balanced enough to take on foes out in the world will be key to co-operative survival.

4 RIDICULOUS SCALE

If we can say anything about *Scalebound*, it's how impressed we've been seeing the game shift and evolve since it was first unveiled back in 2014. Platinum Games seems to be pushing the Xbox One hardware in ways that we haven't seen before, looking to build an adventure game on a larger scale than anything we've seen on the console thus far. Your huge dragon, Thuban, is responsive to your actions in an impressive fashion, while we continue to be blown away by the size and scale of the boss battles.

SHADOW TACTICS: BLADES OF THE SHOGUN

This is one of those interesting ideas that could go either way as development wraps up. A real-time tactics game that relies on stealth to see you through encounters will test your skill and patience, while the Edo period of ancient Japan setting sets it apart from the competition.

RAIDERS OF THE BROKEN PLANET

Wondering what happened to *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow* developer, Mercury Steam and producer David Cox? It turns out the Spanish studio has gone it alone, opting to self-publish this quirky new online multiplayer asymmetric adventure, blending shooting and strategy to great affect. A beta is taking applications now.

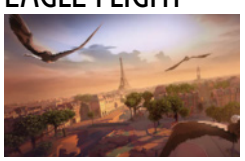
FARPOINT

Already looking to be PSVR's first 'must-play' exclusive, this debut project from Impulse Gear has proven to be a hugely impressive showcase for the new virtual reality tech. After crash-landing on an alien planet, you're forced to battle your way though strange creatures and uncover the secrets of the world. Strange, unnerving, immersive; everything you could want from a VR game.

ROBINSON: THE JOURNEY

Crysis developer Crytek may no longer be developing big budget triple-A games anymore, but it's doing some incredibly impressive work in the VR space. *Robinson: The Journey* is the company's latest, bringing exploration to a beautifully strange land. Crytek is bringing its penchant for building beautiful worlds to PSVR, and the Cry Engine has never looked this good.

EAGLE FLIGHT



This really could go either way for Ubisoft. Picture a multiplayer dogfighting game where you don't pilot a plane but - wait for it – an *eagle* over the streets of abandoned Paris, and you may get a sense of the bizarre concept we're being presented with here. This is going to require multiple friends that own VR headsets, but looks like it could be fun with the right crowd.

7 THINGS YOU MIGHT HAVE MISSED IN RESIDENT EVIL VII

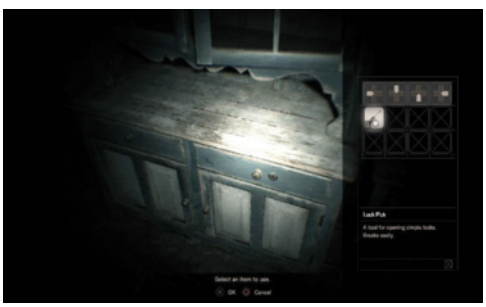
WELCOME BACK TO THE WORLD OF SURVIVAL HORROR

Format: PS4, PC, Xbox One **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Capcom
Developer: In-house **Release:** 24 January **Players:** 1

AT A GLANCE, it might seem like the switch to a first-person perspective is a huge change for the series. The early games used fixed camera angles to help build tension by restricting player visibility, which is exactly what the first-person viewpoint does to great effect in existing horror experiences such as *Amnesia* and *PT*. *Resi* itself, while maybe not known for it, is also no stranger to this camera angle – the original games used it to disguise loading and add to atmosphere while passing through doors, plus it's use of cutscenes in many early titles.

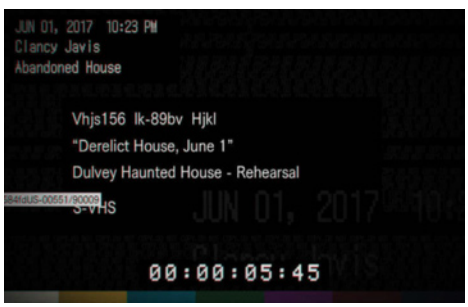
Even from the *Beginning Hour* demo (which is, apparently, not taken from the main game – it's a taster of what the experience will be like, rather than direct content), it's clear to see that many hallmarks of the series that got rubbed off as it performed more and more combat rolls and suplexes have been restored. Inventory management within a limited grid and object-based puzzle solving both return, with Capcom adding that encounters will be stripped back from the mobs of foes in recent games back to fewer, more dangerous enemies. There are even direct references to earlier games buried in the demo, such as the photo in the attic that suggests that the house is under Umbrella surveillance.

While this clearly won't be Resi as we know it, that's probably for the best – a formula change has been long overdue and this appears to be about as faithful to the franchise's roots as it can realistically be given the choice of direction. With full PlayStation VR support promised and solid foundations on which to build based on our experience of this brief, mysterious demo, we'd advise anyone screaming at Capcom for completely changing the direction of the series to consult the history books. The last time it did anything this drastic with the franchise, we got *Resi 4* – you know, one of the best games ever made. The series ain't a Jill sandwich just yet...



1 MASTER OF UNLOCKING

During the VHS section, check the floor behind the microwave to find a lockpick. This can be used to open the locked drawer in the kitchen cabinet which, while empty at the time, will also be open when you return to the present day and contain a little something to play around with. Have fun with your new axe... but will anyone ever work out what you're actually supposed to do with it, if anything?



2 WE DO IT

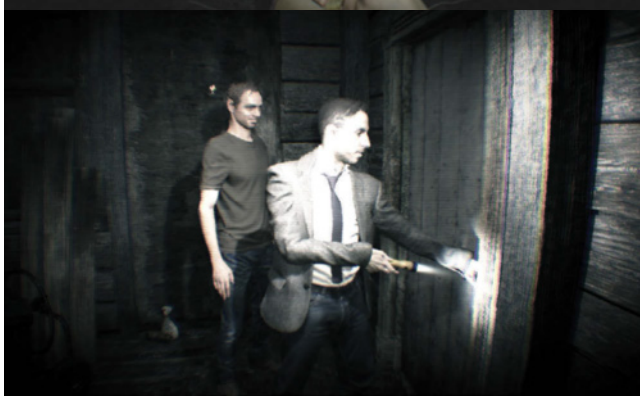
The title cards for the VHS sequences feature the code US-00551/90009, which is the SKU for *Resident Evil: Director's Cut* (NTSC/U) on PSone. Internet detectives highlighted that the game shipped with a demo of *RE2*, suggesting that *RE7* may come with a demo of *REmake 2*, or perhaps a teaser for the remake could be the reward for finding the demo's rumoured 'true' ending.

4 WHAT'S INSIDE?

Several boxes scattered around the house have the word 'harawata' scribbled out and replaced with a 7. Harawata, which translates from Japanese as 'entrails' or 'guts', is believed to be the in-production codename for *RE7*. And the name-based secrets don't stop there – in the logo for Capcom's VR horror demo *Kitchen*, which depicted scenes similar to those that bookend this demo, the 'T' looks an awful lot like a '7'...

5 DOWN IN THE BAYOU

Elements have hinted at a Louisiana setting, with 'Ghosts sighted in bayou' on a newspaper. The icon on the brightness setting screen also features a pelican, the bird on the state's flag. Online sleuths may have narrowed down the setting further, with one pointing out that converting time codes on the VHS tape screens to DMS longitude/latitude coordinates points to Lake Providence, Louisiana. Both tape and paper reference the fictional town of Dulvey.

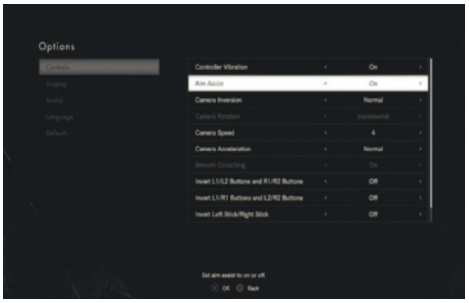


3 MOST HAUNTED

Hidden throughout the VHS segment are multiple possible sightings of a ghostly woman who appears only briefly. These are triggered based on location and camera placement, making sighting pot luck unless you know where to look and when. Some are suggesting this implies a supernatural element to *RE7*, but it could just as easily be hoaxes for the video, hallucinations or something else entirely.

6 SUR-BIBLE HORROR

The first note you find in the demo reads 'I shall dash them against the stones', seemingly a direct reference to Psalms 137:9 in the Bible. The passage in question deals with wishing divine judgment upon those who commit great sin. A window into the motives of the shack's messed-up residents, perhaps – they may see their violent acts as justice against a society they see as having wronged them somehow.



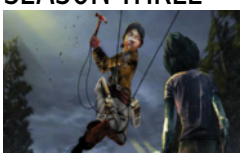
7 CHECK YOUR SETTINGS

The Brightness Pelicans aren't the only clue you can find in the demo's menus. Those worried that the final game could eschew gunplay and ammo management in line with other first-person horror games can rest easy – the HUD option specifically references an ammo count while the Control tab has an option for adjusting aim assist, both inferring the inclusion of ranged weapons in the final game.

WILSON'S HEART

This represents a tonal shift for developer Twisted Pixel, leaving behind the colourful wackiness of the likes of *LocoCycle* and *Comic Jumper* in favour of a black-and-white psychological thriller set in the 1940s. Developed for Oculus Rift and Touch, it looks to be a sci-fi mystery, using the immersion of VR for you to play a hospital patient who wakes up to find his heart replaced with a strange device.

THE WALKING DEAD: SEASON THREE

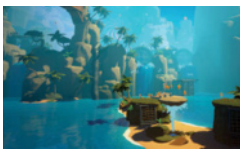


After the disappointment of the *Michonne* spin-off mini-series and a slightly shaky second season, we find ourselves concerned rather than excited for Clem's return. Telltale's still got it for its other titles, though, so we hope the studio can spin the illusion of choice in clever new ways to sucker us back in as well as the excellent original series did.

ANARCUTE

The mismatched message and style of this cutesy riot game – in which adorable critters rally together to fight back against the Brainwash Patrol and take back real-world cities by force – makes us a little uneasy, but we admit that it does look quite fun. Think *Katamari* and *Pikmin* in terms of how you amass your angry mob, with a dash of *The Wonderful 101* when it comes to facing off against evil.

SKYLAR & PLUX: ADVENTURE ON CLOVER ISLAND



The old-school 3D platforming renaissance continues, and this time it's Grip Digital and Right Nice Games that have recruited an unlikely duo of heroes to hop around suitably colourful takes on the staple environments of the genre. An untrained eye might mistake it for a *Ratchet & Clank* game.

STATIK

Living up to its name, *Statik* is one of many games investigating how new VR experiences (PSVR, in this case) can work without the player barely having to move. It's a puzzle game where you wake up in a lab each day with a different hand-mounted puzzle to solve; a cool premise, provided that the team has the smarts to come up with enough interesting puzzles to stop it getting stale quickly.

WHAT IS **FIFA 17'S** CHEMISTRY?

BREAKING DOWN THE KEY GAMEPLAY FEATURES

Format: PS4, PC, Xbox One **Origin:** Canada **Publisher:** EA Canada
Developer: EA Sports **Release:** 29 September 2016 **Players:** 1-TBC

1 GOALKEEPERS

We saw some pretty stunning one-handed saves as we played *FIFA 17*, but then we did only have the top sides available to us. They didn't seem to be getting caught out in one-on-one situations though, which may prove to be a tough improvement for strikers to beat

RATING: 7.7

2 TACTICAL DEFENDING

This has been a divisive feature for FIFA fans, but we've grown to enjoy more player-controlled position and pressing in the series. With a more physical engine, stepping between player and ball is more viable. Positioning is enough to win the ball without tackling.

RATING: 7.8

3 AUTHENTICITY

FIFA once again has every licence under the sun for its multitude of leagues and players, this year adding the 20 Premier League managers too. It all helps add to the immersion of the experience playing this game, even if you only ever play as a League 2 side.

RATING: 8.4

4 GRAPHICS

The introduction of the Frostbite engine has been greatly touted and there's no doubt that in pre-match sequences and during the new Journey mode, player likenesses are amazing. On the field in real time we didn't notice too much improvement. Lighting does appear better.

RATING: 8.3

5 USER INTERFACE

FIFA has a tendency to either stick with a UI or make a change fairly late in the reveal process for its titles. Of late, the interface has been pretty good, allowing for easy team management. Some smart additions to quickly restarting matches are welcome, but we'll need to see more.

RATING: 7.7

6 PASSING

Passing in *FIFA 17* still has a little of that magnetic quality about it, not exactly following your dictation to the letter. However, wayward passes seem less frequent and fast, short passing is still very satisfying. The more physical style means passing in tight spaces is better than ever.

RATING: 6.6

PES 2017 FEATURES RATED

DOES PES 2017 REALLY HAVE FIFA BEAT IN ALL AREAS?

Format: PS4, PC, Xbox One **Origin:** PES Productions **Publisher:** Konami **Developer:** EA Sports **Release:** Q4 2016 **Players:** 1-TBC

1 GOALKEEPERS

Opinion is out on the goalkeepers for *PES 2017*. New motions and animations mean this year's instalment has the most agile keepers yet, which means getting anything in the back of the net is subsequently tougher than ever. It's a classic PES move.

RATING: 8.1

2 TACTICAL DEFENDING

If you subscribe to the notion that *PES* is shooting to become a simulation of the beautiful game itself, then you'll likely love the changes Konami has made to defensive operations. Keeping hold of the ball is tough, but getting back possession is even harder.

RATING: 7.9

3 AUTHENTICITY

PES has always struggled with authenticity and this year is no different. Where every other area of the game is seeing great innovation, it's tough to swallow playing as the likes of East Midlands and Man Blue as opposed to their real-life counterparts.

RATING: 5.0

4 GRAPHICS

The FOX Engine is able to render incredible character models and demonstrates the capacity to capture players and their individual temper tendencies, That said, nothing breaks immersion faster than seeing gawping repeat faces in crowds that look like they've been ripped out of *AC: Unity*.

RATING: 7.5

5 USER INTERFACE

For all the points that Konami wins on the pitch, it always seems to lose them with its efforts off of it. The UI is still a mess and in desperate need of an overhaul, even the simple act of making substitutions is painful. It's such a shame, considering the quality elsewhere.

RATING: 4.5

6 PASSING

It was great to see the new Precise Pass system fit naturally into the traditional pacing of PES. New ball physics combined with hundreds of new animations mean that, like defending, passing is tougher, but ultimately more satisfying, than ever.

RATING: 7.7

By switching to the Frostbite engine, the FIFA team has given itself a far superior lighting engine to work with and the results, as you can see, are amazing.

A FOOTBALLER'S LIFE

EA Canada has described The Journey as the biggest new mode to be added to *FIFA* since FIFA Ultimate Team. That feature has turned into a massive draw for the series, but we're not sure The Journey will be the same. While getting to see a story set behind the scenes of a professional footballer's life has its intrigue, we're a little nervous about whether this developer has the narrative nous to pull off something more than a fairly clichéd story. It could be a very cool spin on the Be A Pro mode or a complete waste of time. Right now we have no idea.

7 SETPIECES

There's been an overhaul here as corners and distance free kicks as the camera will remain in its default position. For corners a small reticule indicates where the ball is being aimed, which can be moved with the left stick. Long-distance free kicks are treated like normal passes.

RATING: 8.4

8 DRIBBLING

FIFA 17 feels like a much more physical game than last year, allowing for players to hold up the ball more often and even trap the ball in the air on their chests rather than heading it. This is a big area of improvement for a game whose skill moves were already very good.

RATING: 9.1

9 AI

FIFA's AI at this early stage may still need a little optimisation as Semi-Pro (default for our initial game-time) was a breeze and Pro seemed considerably harder. In attack, AI moves fast, passes creatively and pressures well. It's a strong point of this game.

RATING: 7.5

10 GOAL FEEL

Some newly enhanced physics, slightly slower pace and overall more solid feel to build-up play means that scoring in *FIFA* feels a little more weighty than previously, but still oddly lacking in real passion. A goal is expected, it's not a special, rare occurence.

RATING: 5.8

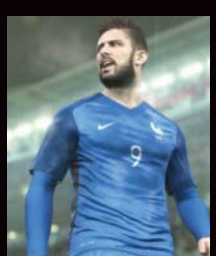
11 SHOOTING

Some new attacking intelligence upgrades to team AI should be more creative runs from midfielders and forwards, exploiting gaps in the defence as well as unprotected space on the field and hopefully created more shooting opportunities.

RATING: 8.2

STEADY DEVELOPMENT

For the first time in many years, Konami has the ability to work knowing *Pro Evolution Soccer* is in a positive position. *PES 2017* isn't a major overhaul, but an incremental update to last year's ever-impressive showing. Problems are being addressed, animations improved and the moment-to-moment action made as fluid as possible on the Fox Engine. It doesn't have the pick-up-and-play ease of *FIFA*, but, then again, it isn't supposed to. *PES 2017* is striving to be a simulation of a football game, whereas *FIFA* still seems content on replicating the spectator sport experience – all spectacle and no depth.



7 SETPIECES

The introduction of defensive strategies whilst defending against setpieces is wonderful, though the failure to develop the path indicator is a massive shame. It's still too fiddly to appropriately aim balls into the box, a system at odds with the fluidity of the rest of the experience.

RATING: 5.0

8 DRIBBLING

A major revision to the way different players interact with the ball could prove to be a big upset. Touch is conditioned to change based on the unpredictable movement of the ball, occasionally causing frustration at tense and integral moments.

RATING: 7.3

9 AI

Adaptive AI has been touted as the future of sports games, but it seemed to have little impact out on the pitch. Defensively-focused players seemed to exhibit more aggressive tendencies than expected, though this could just be teething problems with the early build.

RATING: 5.2

10 GOAL FEEL

There's still no greater pleasure to be found than scoring a screamer in PES. Rarely challenged by the opposition – but undeniably slick all the same – Konami understands the magic behind a great goal better than any football developer out there.

RATING: 9.4

11 SHOOTING

PES has always looked strong up-front, but this year it seems to have found even finer form. Attacking play is fluid and exciting; there's a big emphasis on smart link-up-play between outfield players to find space in front of goal.

RATING: 8.6

THE WITCHER'S **GWENT** GOES SOLO

EVERYONE'S FAVOURITE MINI-GAME GETS THE EXPANSION IT DESERVES

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** Poland **Publisher:** CD Projekt
Developer: CD Projekt Red **Release:** TBC 2016 **Players:** 1-2

NO ONE WHO played the Gwent games in *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* will be the least bit surprised to see it get an expanded standalone release. It was one of many highlights in CD Projekt Red's award-winning RPG and deserving of greater development. The team has dived back into what was supposed to be a relatively simple experience and built upon it, expanding the gameplay and giving it more competitive depth.

The systems of the game will remain the same, with the ten cards you get to start a match being the only ones you'll have available to you through each contest. The different decks have been given more specialisations (Northern Realms is now more siege-focused, for instance) and many new cards have been added to include elements from the entirety of trilogy. Many cards will also now feature new bonuses, such as Muster, which holds cards on the field between rounds, as it can now also add modifiers.

Playing against human players is likely to make *Gwent* a very different game, but in order to make it a greater package, a single-player campaign is also being developed. This will involve AI opponents drawn from throughout the Witcher series with stories that cross over with events from all of the games, although they won't strictly be canon.

The Elder Scrolls: Legends will be releasing as a free to play game on PC and mobile, competing directly with *Hearthstone* in many respects. Given its additional complexity it will be interesting to see how it fairs

THE ELDER SCROLLS: LEGENDS JOINS THE FRAY

TAMRIEL TAKES ON THE TCG

Format: PC, iOS **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** Bethesda Softworks
Developer: Dire Wolf Digital **Release:** TBC 2016 **Players:** 1-2

IN SOME WAYS it's surprising that it's taken so long for *The Elder Scrolls* to get a card game, but here it finally is and it's as traditional as you would expect. Instantly you can see the influence of Magic: The Gathering and *Hearthstone* on how Bethesda has gone about developing its own card game, but there is also some innovation.

The first is the introduction of lanes to the battlefield, having you place your cards on the left or right of the arena. These cards can then either attack cards on the opposite side of their respective lane or the opponent player directly, chipping away at their health. The tactical challenge that lanes are likely to present players with will be interesting to explore, but some positive beta feedback for the game already would suggest it's a small and welcome twist on TCG standards.

Another key aspect is that each player has five runes that break as you lose five points of health. As they break, you draw a card, which might feature a prophecy ability that could change the face of the entire board and swing the game in your direction. This doesn't look like a case of bandwagon-jumping; some real thought has been put into *Legends*.

HOW THE ORIGINAL TRILOGY IS SHAPING **MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA**

NEW DETAILS ON BIOWARE'S MASSIVE NEW RPG EMERGE AS THE TEAM REFLECTS ON ITS PAST

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** Canada **Publisher:** EA **Developer:** BioWare **Release:** 2017 **Players:** 1-TBC

1 A NEW, YOUNGER HERO

■ Ryder is the name of BioWare's new adventurer and while they will be human, like Shepard, they can still be either male or female, and customised. It's good to see a series sticking with one of the elements that made it so popular, unlike *FFXV*'s all-dude crew. What's more, both Ryder and their crew will be skewed a little younger than the characters we saw in the original *ME* trilogy. This is something that will be explained by *Andromeda*, but it also means that you'll be playing as a less experienced team, discovering a new galaxy and their role at the same time. It should also mean you have greater scope to dictate the evolution and growth of Ryder.

2 SMALLER STORY, GRANDER SCALE

■ The mission of the Ark (the giant ship we see Ryder wake up on) is to find a potential new home for humanity and the many other races that make up Citadel space back in the Milky Way. But, since the trip has taken a very long time (possibly hundreds of years), it's unclear whether upon arrival that mission may have evolved. Ultimately, *Andromeda* will be focusing on your team, your impact on this new galaxy, the decisions you make and the fate you carve out for yourself. The wider repercussions and broader scale of events in *Andromeda* will be background, at least for this first game in a potential new series.

3 TOUGHER LOVE

■ Relationships have been a core element of both the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* series, both romantic and platonic. BioWare has said that the same will be true again here, including same-sex relationships, as has been the case with the more recent titles. What's more, it won't be as easy to attract an NPC or solidify the loyalty of your crew as it has been before. Some characters will be naturally resistant and tougher to talk to, needing more work over time, others will react in a stronger way to your actions in the game than before. We're expecting a friendship and relationship system with much more subtlety and nuance.

4 MORE PLAYER IMPACT

■ The decisions you make in this game could have lasting and substantial impact on the series. That's been true since the original *Mass Effect*, of course, with many decisions lasting to *Mass Effect 3*. In this instance though your presence as an alien to this galaxy could mean lasting repercussions for entirely new species. And you will have more personalisation options, too, allowing you to influence your environment more than before. That may mean some interior decorating being done on your new ship, the Tempest, but that could stretch to new species you meet and planets that you land on. Since this is a brand new Mass Effect, the slate is clean.

5 MULTIPLAYER, BUT NO CROSSOVER

■ BioWare seems pretty happy with how players responded to *Mass Effect 3*'s multiplayer on a gameplay level, but recognises that many became annoyed at how important it could prove to be to events in the single-player campaign. As such it has stated that while multiplayer will be returning for *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (with some changes and upgrades), it will not have any influence over the main narrative. Good news, as the online experience was fun, replicated in recent years by *Plants Vs Zombies: Garden Warfare*, of all games, and many will prefer to play solo only, without feeling pressured into the rest of the package.

GEARS OF WAR 4 GETS BACK TO BASICS

GRAPHICS, GORE AND BODY HORROR DRIVE THE COALITION'S SERIES REVIVAL

Format: Xbox One, PC, **Origin:** Canada **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios
Developer: The Coalition **Release:** 4 November 2016 **Players:** 1-10

THE MANTRA THE Coalition repeated to us several times when we saw *Gears Of War 4* during its multiplayer beta stage was that it wanted to do it right before it tried to do it better. And yet, in returning to the core principles of the series and attempting to rebuild them with an improved engine and a few modern narrative sensibilities, it may have improved things far more than it originally thought possible.

The proof of this can be found in the single-player campaign, which we finally had a chance to play having spent some time earlier in the year with the new online modes. The first thing that jumps out of course is the graphical presentation of *Gears 4*. The single-player as it currently stands looks far more impressive than the beta did, but then that side of the game has also been greatly enhanced in recent months. The Coalition had always insisted the beta was truly a work-in-progress slice of the final game and the fact that it looks so much more impressive now, as optimisation progresses, speaks to the honesty of that.

One element that has been reclaimed is the horror element of the series. While it's tough to scare someone with a chainsaw attached to their gun, *Gears* started off as a game heavily inspired by *Resident Evil 4* and as such it had its fair share of jump scares and gruesome reveals. *Gears 4* goes after this with gusto thanks to its new enemies, the Swarm, who are apparently kidnapping people, sticking them in pods and turning them into mindless drones. It's a body-horror nightmare and one that is likely to give *Gears 4* the grounding it needs to give it a little humanity on top of all the explosions and big effects.

And the effects are stunning. Finally getting to experience the wind flares and electric storms in this game was a visual treat. This is The Coalition in full swagger, flashing its mastery of Unreal Engine 4 and tense, setpiece gameplay. It's all very scripted and controlled, but it's still intimidating and jaw-droppingly thrilling. As we guide JD, Kait and Del through this wild and dangerous landscape, we never really know what the great threat will be around the next corner: the weather or the Swarm.

The Coalition is smartly holding a lot back with its gradual rollout of *Gears 4* information, starting off with the relatively unsurprising multiplayer features and now expanding to small snippets of campaign gameplay and basic story elements. It all points to the team having faith that its story is one that is deserving of a little spoiler protection. And we finally have confirmation that Horde mode is coming back. No surprise there either, but it wouldn't really be a proper *Gears* sequel without it. Yet again, The Coalition is making all the right moves.

This is the beginning of a brand new cycle of games, so while for the most part it appears to be solid update of the series, it will likely plant seeds for future expansions and improvements.

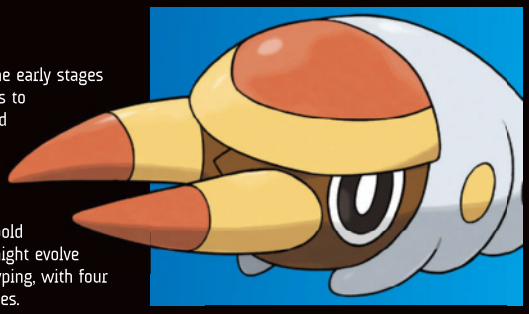
Marcus Fenix had already been teased by trailers but now appears to have been confirmed to be making an appearance thanks to the last gameplay reveal at E3.

POKÉMON SUN & MOON
A STELLAR NEW CHAPTER
NEW POKÉMON DISCOVERED IN ALOLA

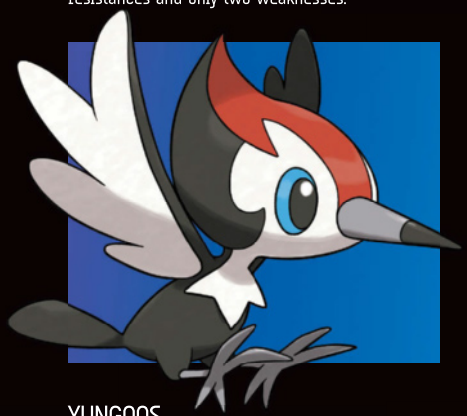
Format: 3DS **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** Game Freak **Release:** 23 November **Players:** 1-4

GRUBBIN

TYPE: BUG **ABILITY:** SWARM



■ Bug types are always useful in the early stages of a new Pokémon adventure thanks to the fact that they typically grow and evolve quicker than most other types. Its official description states that it loves electricity and can be found near substations and generators – this coupled with its bold yellow highlights suggests that it might evolve into a Bug/Electric hybrid; a solid typing, with four resistances and only two weaknesses.



PIKIPEK

TYPE: NORMAL/FLYING **ABILITY:** KEEN EYE/SKILL LINK

■ Every region needs its Pidgey equivalent, and this little woodpecker is one of the most adorable yet. Predictably, it's a three-stage evolution line and its inevitable ability to learn Fly will be great news for anyone that didn't choose Rowlet as their starter. Skill Link, likely to be its Hidden Ability, is excellent with the right move set, allowing multi-hit moves to always land five times – its text mentions firing seeds, suggesting Bullet Seed would work, Fury Attack is almost a given and their could even be a new Flying type multi-hit move related to its rapid pecks.

YUNGOOS

TYPE: NORMAL **ABILITY:** STAKEOUT/STRONG JAW

■ The art for this vicious-looking mongoose/ferret thing isn't great but the in-game model makes it look way better. A ravenous appetite sees it scampering around and gnawing on or eating whatever it can find, hinting that it'll get a bunch of the different bite moves, which would also benefit from its second Ability. The first is more interesting, though, a new skill that doubles damage on attacks that his a new Pokémon that switches in. Normal types don't force many switches, but this could be vicious in Doubles, or if another new monster with better typing gets it as well.

MAGEARNA

TYPE: STEEL/FAIRY **ABILITY:** SOUL-HEART

■ There's always one Mythical monster that's easier to get than the rest, and this constructed Pokémon is the Sun and Moon version – all you need to do to get one is scan a QR code in the game. Its superb type combo effectively cancels out all Fairy-type weaknesses while offering it a bunch of resistances and even two immunities, leaving it weak to only Fire and Ground attacks. Its ability is another brand new one, boosting its Special Attack one stage every time another Pokémon faints – decent in Singles matches but potentially incredible with more monsters in play.

POKÉMON GO WILL MAKE US ALL TRAINERS
TURN YOUR PHONE INTO A POKÉDEX

Format: Mobile **Origin:** US **Publisher:** The Pokémon Company
Developer: Niantic/Nintendo **Release:** July **Players:** MMO

■ **SO YOU WANT** to be the very best, like no one ever was? Then it's time to put down the consoles and dedicate yourself to becoming a real-life Pokémon trainer, something you can actually do no thanks to Niantic's new free-to-play mobile game. Extremely similar in terms of setup to the studio's popular ARG *Ingress*, *Pokémon Go* uses smartphone GPS systems to track players as they roam the real world in search of wild monsters placed and hidden all over the world. Locations play a part in what you might find, so Water types will favour coastal areas and lakes while Bugs may prefer woods and forests. Hopefully this won't be taken too far, though – we're not about to clamber into a power plant in search of a Voltorb.

Other staples of the franchise are also present and it's not just wild Pokémon you'll find on your travels but gyms too. These can be joined or challenged depending on which of the three factions you (and the gym) belong to, racking up points for your team as you overcome rival gyms or defend your own. Evolution is in too (though it works by repeatedly catching Pokémon to earn candies to trigger evolution), as are eggs that can be hatched as you walk around. It's a gimmick, sure, but it's a strangely involving one and *Ingress* has proven that the format works – applying it to one of the biggest gaming properties on the planet might just be one of the most sensible and forward-thinking decisions Nintendo has made in years.

The core concept of the DC universe battling it out like this really shouldn't work and yet this is looking like an even better fighter than *Gods Among Us*.

INJUSTICE 2 ASKS US TO GEAR UP

EVERY BATTLE DEFINES YOU

Format: PS4, Xbox One **Origin:** US **Publisher:** Warner Bros. **Developer:** NetherRealm **Release:** 2017 **Players:** 1-2 (2-TBC online)

AFTER THE PLEASANT surprise that was the original DC fighter – both in terms of quality and commercial success – *Injustice 2* was always going to happen. But coming off the back of the excellent *Mortal Kombat X*, expectations are higher than ever, although it doesn't seem like all that much has really changed. Returning characters like Batman and Superman have been tweaked slightly but still have many of the exact same moves and combos seen in the last game, while newcomers appear to be plugging gaps left by presumed absentees – Atrocitus shows elements of Sinestro and Zod's play styles while Gorilla Grodd could just fill the huge boots left by Grundy.

The core new feature is a gear progression system not unlike that of *SoulCalibur III* or *IV*, with loot drops after each match affecting stats and abilities as well as making your chosen fighter look a little different. We're on board with something like this for solo depth (an area in which NetherRealm seldom comes up short) but historically, it's been notoriously tough to balance for competitive play. Ed Boon has stated that the team will be looking to buck that trend, though there was also the suggestion that a 'pure' mode without the gear system could exist as well.

With new uses for super meter (including an aerial recovery to escape juggles), a streamlined UI where all data is worked around the life and super gauges, even more ridiculous supers and stage transitions and a larger starting roster than the last game, *Injustice 2* is off to a promising start. We just wish the team would ditch or rework the pointless Clash mechanic...

DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN SHINES ONCE AGAIN

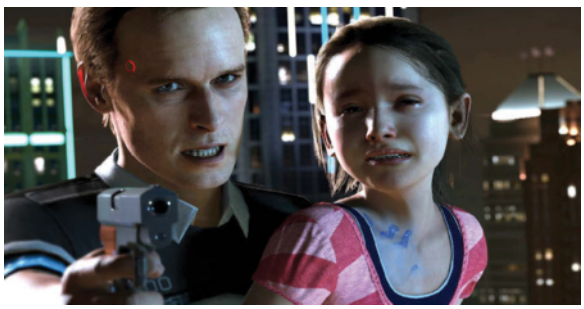
AN ANDROID GAME RUNNING ON PS4

Format: PS4 **Origin:** France **Publisher:** Sony **Developer:** Quantic Dream **Release:** 2017 **Players:** 1

THERE ARE FEW more divisive things in the triple-A gaming space than the collected works of David Cage. For every fan of his interesting approach to interactive storytelling, there are accusations of poor writing and unbelievable characters and events; for every piece of praise for the games' visuals, you'll see as many 'uncanny valley' complaints; for every captivating or emotional moment, an awkwardly crowbarred-in sex scene or Jason meme. It's quite impressive, in its own intriguing way.

With *Detroit*, though, Cage has solutions on-hand for many common complaints levelled at his games. Additional writers have been brought in to help flesh out characters and improve dialogue, but moreover, the game's setting also serves to act as a fail-safe – it's hard to complain about robotic animation, dead-eyed characters and awkward interactions when you're dealing with android characters, after all. Production line androids also present interesting possibilities in the event of failure on a gameplay level. While death in *Heavy Rain* would simply write a character out of the story entirely, here we could see 'lost characters' replaced with factory setting originals with a different kind of impact on the bigger picture.

The originally-revealed Kara – an android at odds with her kind's place in the world – has been joined by a second playable synthetic in Connor, a police model used in hostage negotiations. While Kara's story appears to show the reaction of the world to androids that questions its position and want more from their existence, here we get a different angle that explores how people treat even those who serve as intended. Expect more playable characters and some ludicrous overarching narrative... it *is* a David Cage game, after all.



CAN **STEEP** RESURRECT EXTREME SPORTS GAMING?

UBISOFT LOOKS TO BRING THE DIVISION TO THE ALPS

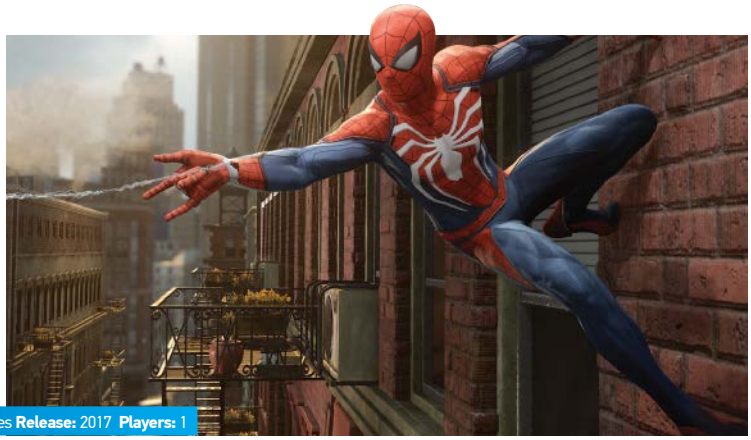
Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** France **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Developer:** Ubisoft Annecy **Release:** December 2016 **Players:** 1-TBC

INSPIRED BY THE open world and traversal systems of *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*, Ubisoft is taking a swing at a genre that's been off the boil for a while now: extreme sports. Attempted revivals of titles like *SSX* and even Ubisoft's own licensed *Shaun White* series proved unsuccessful, but by bringing open world exploration and multiplayer integration similar to *The Division* to *Steep*, a formula may have been found that will lead to success.

It helps that the game is looking pretty intense and exhilarating, which is exactly what this type of game needs to achieve, helped by a licensing deal with GoPro that gives the game its GoPro camera position (you can also play in third-person). You can switch between skis, snowboard, parachute and wingsuit on the fly before leaping down the mountain ranges of the Alps. There are events and challenges all over the mountain and everyone can jump in at any time. Perhaps the most interesting element though is the trail you leave behind. Every run you make is recorded and you can play it back, moving the camera and perspective around as you like. You can also pick out key moments, like a jump off a particularly challenging ledge, and send it out as a challenge to your friends. This could be a very cool community feature.

WHY THIS COULD BE THE PERFECT **SPIDER-MAN** GAME

SONY'S EXCLUSIVE HAS THE RIGHT DEVELOPER AND THE RIGHT IDEAS

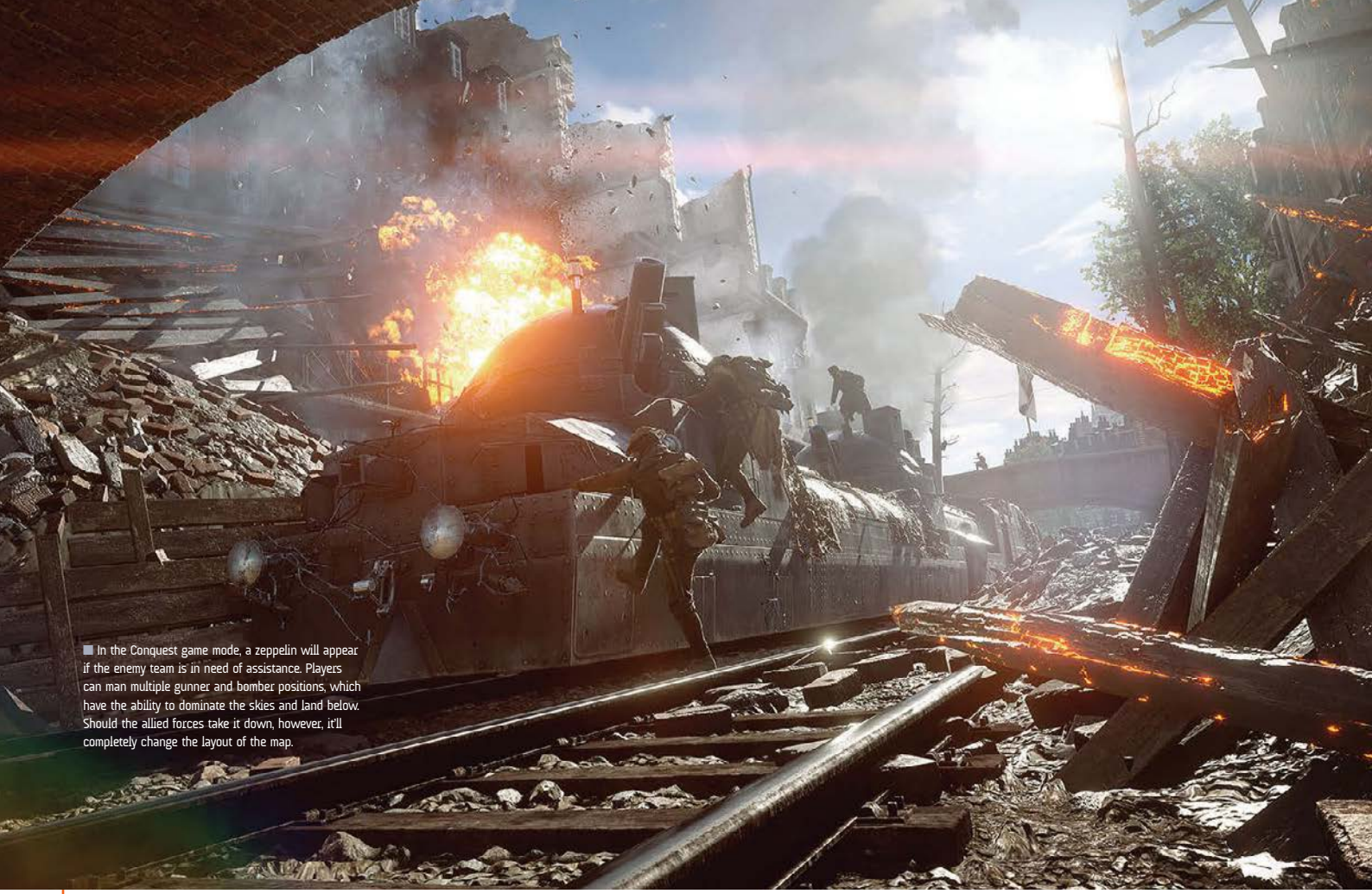


Format: PS4 **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer:** Insomniac Games **Release:** 2017 **Players:** 1

THE FIRST THING to know about *Spider-Man* is that the rather exciting trailer from E3 was actually made up of a lot of in-game footage. Scenes of Spidey parkouring his way through a coffee shop, for instance, are said to be directly from the PS4 exclusive. Insomniac has made the decision to set this adventure a little later in Peter Parker's life, avoiding the need for an origin story and giving us access to a more experienced, better equipped Peter Parker than we've seen in a while.

What that also shows us is that this can be a story set around the most interesting and rich element of the character's life; how Peter balances being Spider-Man with his normal existence. Insomniac has recalled how Marvel's games head Bill Roseman explained this line of thinking when discussion for this game first begun, and that's been the guiding interest from then on.

And what *that* all means is we're likely to go on a journey with the wall-crawler in a similar way to how Rocksteady introduced Batman in *Arkham Asylum*. He knows how to fight, he knows how to move and he knows how to be a hero. All you have to do is show you can harness all of those abilities and fight crime around New York. And as for the costume... it's still splitting opinion, but Insomniac promises there's a story behind it. We're still hoping there might be some costume changing or upgrading options in the game to switch it out. We'd love to get some Scarlet Spider action going.



■ In the Conquest game mode, a zeppelin will appear if the enemy team is in need of assistance. Players can man multiple gunner and bomber positions, which have the ability to dominate the skies and land below. Should the allied forces take it down, however, it'll completely change the layout of the map.

HOW **BATTLEFIELD 1** IS BLOWING AWAY THE COMPETITION

MULTIPLAYER PRODUCER ANDREAS MORELL TALKS SCALE

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC **Origin:** Sweden **Publisher:** EA **Developer:** DICE **Release:** 21 October 2016 **Players:** 1-64

What was the focus of *Battlefield 1*'s multiplayer?

For *Battlefield 1* we really want to push team play. That is a big aspect of the game. It's something that really resonates with the era and it's true to Battlefield. I wouldn't say we design the maps specifically around encouraging team play; it's more about designing it for the best experience possible.

That's been our mindset going into it; how can we make the best possible game? This era is so unique in terms of what it offers. Once we started digging into World War 1, we really discovered that it's a perfect match for the Battlefield franchise and its core gameplay pillars – everything evolved naturally out of that.

***Battlefield 1* features the biggest vehicles ever seen in the series, what does this bring to the franchise?**

It goes back to this really unique setting. It's the dawn of all out warfare and it's the birth of modern warfare – in no other era could we build and have these big zeppelins, airships, the armoured train and then the big battleships. It just allows us to do so much that we haven't been allowed to do before... [Activision], *Modern Warfare*, they don't do big things like that! This is just cool and epic; we're really excited about that and about being able to deliver the biggest vehicles that we've ever built to our players to cause havoc in.

Have these giant vehicle events replaced Levolutions? When the zeppelin is eventually gunned down it absolutely levels entire sections of the map...

We really want this to be a dynamic game in every aspect; no battle is ever the same, that's a big pillar for us going into *Battlefield 1*. The weather is a big part of this: playing on a sunny day and then all of a sudden seeing fog roll in you really need to change how you want to play.

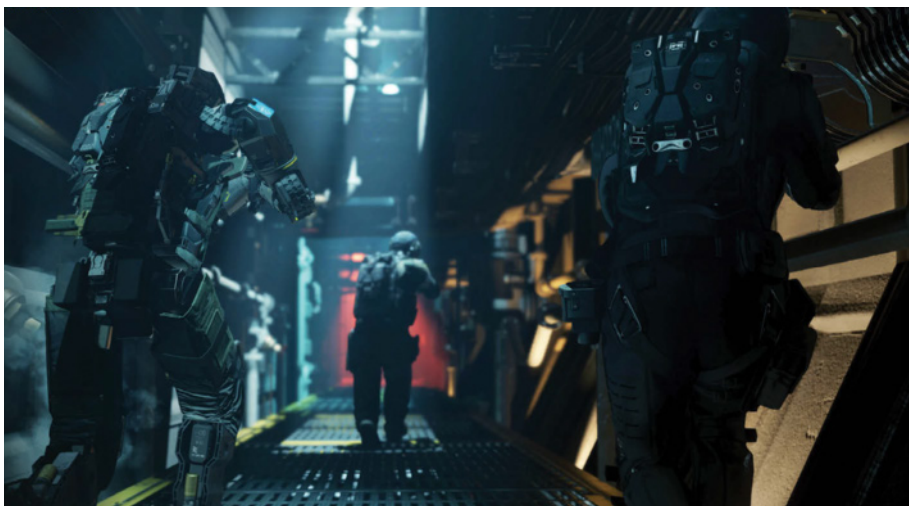
You can't be a sniper being 500 metres away; you need to adapt to the changing battlefield. That goes for destruction as well. The zeppelin is a part of that dynamic aspect, it can go down anywhere and it will change the map. It's all about rolling with the punches and trying to stay ahead of it.

In this build you spawn into planes already in the air. Can you no longer take a plane off and land planes?

The immersion that we are pushing for here is for you to always be connected to the battle. With the new vehicle deploy system we feel that spawning in planes gets you straight into the action; we don't want you to feel disconnected from it. When you die, you can change your loadout, change your play style and even when you're waiting to respawn you still feel like you're in the battle – and that applies to vehicles and planes in particular.

***Battlefield 1*, *Titanfall 2* and *Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare* are all releasing within weeks of one another. What do you think about this?**

It's such an exciting year for players, we're all looking forward to some really exciting games. With the stuff that *Battlefield 1* offers, it's going to be truly unique. It's the perfect match with Battlefield's 'All Out Warfare' mantra and we are going on a journey with our players that is truly amazing.



CALL OF DUTY: INFINITE WARFARE IS SHOOTING FOR THE STARS

LOOKING TO THE PAST TO HELP BUILD A BETTER FUTURE

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** Activision
Developer: Infinity Ward **Release:** 4 November 2016 **Players:** TBC

IF YOU WERE to judge *Infinite Warfare* by its disastrous reveal alone, there's a good chance you wouldn't, *couldn't* see the appeal in *Call Of Duty* shooting straight from the streets and into the stars. But by ignoring *Infinite Warfare* on principle you'll be doing the game, Infinity Ward and – most importantly – yourself a huge disservice. This years' instalment looks incredible, and that isn't mere hyperbole but strategic assessment; because what isn't there to love about fighting through space and taking command of your very own galactic armada?

Infinite Warfare might not look like your traditional Call Of Duty experience, but perhaps that isn't a negative – but instead something to be celebrated. If the last few instalments are anything to go by, it's clear something needed to change. This new format gives Infinity Ward the space to expand the typical gameplay experience; no longer are you a pawn in an army, but a leader. You'll take command of a group of soldiers, your very own customisable ship and a battle cruiser stationed on the edge of Earth's orbit.

Missions may begin on the streets of Earth, but battles often spin out into the skies. You'll jump in your ship and immediately engage in frantic dogfights through space, gunning down enemy ships and tightly manoeuvring through debris. You can leap dock on larger ships, leaping out of the cockpit to engage enemies in zero gravity before taking the fight inside for classic close quarter battles. This is the Call Of Duty that you've been playing for years, but it feels larger – its scale is bigger, more grandiose than anything you've seen from this franchise before.

While we are still yet to see multiplayer in action, the single-player is doing enough to get us excited. And for once it isn't because of a ridiculous cast, but because it seems more immediate and innovative than ever. *Call Of Duty* is even ditching its linear shackles and introducing open elements to play – letting you tackle side-objectives and even direct your cruiser to areas of interest – the gunplay looks faster and more immediate and, ultimately, Infinity Ward is trying to inject some fresh blood into a fledgling franchise.

BLOODSTAINED: RITUAL OF THE NIGHT

Looking for your *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night* fix? The Kickstarter for Koji Igarashi's – the visionary behind the franchise – spiritual successor has finally become playable and the results are positive. *Bloodstained* feels solid, its world vibrant and, as you may expect, it's pretty damned challenging.

PYRE

A new release from Supergiant Games is always worth celebrating. The studio, known for *Bastion* and *Transistor*, has a reputation for delivering artistic, innovative indie games and *Pyre* looks no different. It's an action game with a focus on rich atmospheric storytelling, and we wouldn't want it any other way.

PSYCHONAUTS: IN THE RHOMBUS OF RUIN

Sony's PSVR continues to impress with its slate of upcoming titles, a mixture of innovative new titles and takes on old franchises. The return of *Psychonauts* is worth celebrating – especially as this VR puzzle game looks to take its mind-bending gameplay in an all new direction. This could be the system-seller Sony needs.

HEADLANDER

Despite the stupid, ridiculous premise, *Headlander* actually shows a lot of promise. You're the last remaining human, well, the head of one at least on a mission to topple a deranged computer program in a 70s-inspired sci-fi world. Combat isn't a huge deal here, with a focus on overcoming puzzles and body-swapping to overcome adversity.

After wading through development hell alongside his pet project for the better part of a decade, Fumito Ueda is finally ready to deliver what will no doubt be his most divisive title yet.

CAN THE LAST GUARDIAN DEFY EXPECTATION?

WITH JUST MONTHS TO GO UNTIL LAUNCH, HOW IS THE SUCCESSOR TO SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS LOOKING?

Format: PS4 **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer:** genDESIGN, Japan Studio **Release:** 25 October 2016 **Players:** 1

THE LAST GUARDIAN feels lost in time. And yet, as archaic as it may be in many respects, there's something refreshing about its economic approach to design in this era of gaming. Triple-A games have become bloated monsters, but that's what helps to make this project feel so special. There's no time-dominating open-world or busywork quest lines to distract, instead *The Last Guardian* boasts a pleasantly stated and dated approach to architectural world building. The restraint demonstrated from Ueda in *The Last Guardian* ensures all focus is on a boy and his beast, on their interactions through a foreign land and (honestly) the incredible animations that bring it to life.

It isn't the scale (as impressive as it may be) of Trico that sticks with you, nor is it the staggering detail found in the 3D environments or even the clever navigational and environmental puzzles, but the humanity captured through those animations where *The Last Guardian* comes into its own. More so than any gameplay mechanic or system, the bond between Trico and the boy is the star. The emotion and heart behind this story is told almost entirely in silent interaction - the punctured shrieks of Trico doing far more to build character than any narration or exposition ever could. It's brought to life by clever design cues, such as the beasts' eyes changing colour with his mood or reading the ever-so slight shift in movement and momentum between the two heroes; the simplest of interactions make the biggest statements in *The Last Guardian*.

When *The Last Guardian* first entered development for PlayStation 3, the studio took a gamble with its limited resources. genDESIGN abandoned traditional motion-captured animations and ragdoll physics – the kind you see in almost every modern release – and decided to hand-craft every interaction between the characters and the world around them. Even with the increased power of the PS4 behind it, there are still a few event-triggers and camera problems that exist in the current build, but almost all of it can be forgiven – there aren't many games that feel as human, as honest, as *The Last Guardian* and its intentions.

To think, work began on this project the same year that *Assassin's Creed*, *BioShock* and *Uncharted* all debuted. Franchises that all sought to go bigger – becoming louder, or more grandiose with every subsequent instalment - and yet, here we are, quietly appreciating the nuance behind *The Last Guardian*'s little flourishes. Whether it can surpass expectation is largely irrelevant now, because whether it succeeds or fails to achieve its goals will never distract from the reality that *The Last Guardian* is of a dying breed of design; where story and character aren't just something to tick off on a marketing checklist but are at the very heart and soul of an experience.

> "TO THINK, WORK BEGAN ON THIS PROJECT THE SAME YEAR THAT ASSASSIN'S CREED, BIOSHOCK AND UNCHARTED ALL DEBUTED"

SOUTH PARK: THE FRACTURED BUT WHOLE PROVES COMEDY WORKS IN GAMES

FOUR WAYS MATT STONE AND TREY PARKER ARE LEVELLING UP LARPING

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Developer:** Ubisoft San Francisco **Release:** 6 December 2016 **Players:** 1-4

1 CIVIL WAR

Kicking off almost immediately after the events of *The Stick Of Truth*, *The Fractured But Whole* takes South Park's famous group of LARPing 4th graders into the realm of super heroics. It acts as an offensively amusing parody of *Captain America: Civil War* and the ridiculous franchise battles between Marvel and DC; proving once again that nothing is safe from Matt Stone And Trey Parker's unique take on comedy.

2 CHANGE OF PACE

With Obsidian off the project, Ubisoft San Francisco is making its mark on the series with some sweeping upgrades to the core design. Combat is still turn-based, but you now have the option to move anywhere within a grid to attack or defend. Battles now have a layer of depth to them that makes the feel more like *Fire Emblem*-light as opposed to QTE-driven sequences – this is a huge improvement on the original.

3 UNIQUE STYLE

South Park works perfectly as a videogame on so many levels. *Stick Of Truth* already showed signs of this being the case, though the sequel has you transitioning seamlessly between interactive play and TV-quality cutscenes. If you've felt as if the last few seasons have been all over the place in terms of quality, *The Fractured But Whole* will feel like a return to the 'classic' era of *South Park*.

4 INTERACTIVE COMEDY

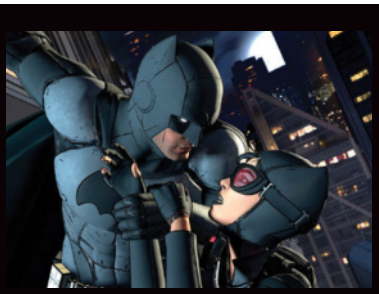
South Park never seemed like a franchise that would fit into Ubisoft's line-up of shooters and party games, but it's treating the game with an awful amount of respect. There's a huge emphasis on interactive comedy, and with many jokes arriving through contextual environment interaction, it's a lot of fun. This only goes to make exploration feel fully formed, like an extended episode of *South Park*.

BATMAN ARKHAM VR PUTS YOU IN THE COWL

Format: PS4 **Origin:** UK **Publisher:** Warner Bros **Developer:** Rocksteady Studios **Release:** September 2016 **Players:** 1

VR EXPERIENCES AND tours seem to be dominating the triple-A spin-off realm at the moment and while most don't get us terribly excited, *Batman Arkham VR* does just enough to draw us in. This isn't just a walking tour of Gotham's hot spots and trendiest coffee shops, this is your chance to put on the cape and cowl in a 3D experience. Enter the bat cave through a secret entrance, put on your costume and then head out into the night to investigate a horrific crime.

It's all in first-person and since it's Rocksteady behind it all, it's in the classic Arkham series style. Detective vision looks to be the main draw as you can interact with it in full 3D, walking around and through visualisations of the crime, winding back and forth, looking for clues. It's not the deepest Batman game ever, but it could be a fun few minutes.



BATMAN: THE TELLTALE SERIES THE BAT VERSUS BRUCE

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC, iOS, Android **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** Telltale Games **Developer:** In-house **Release:** Q3 2016 **Players:** 1

HOW DOES BRUCE Wayne's dual identity affect his life? That's just one question that Telltale's episodic experience is going to be exploring as *Batman: The Telltale Series* kicks off this year. The Dark Knight will need to deal with the great, good and evil of Gotham as both the Dark Knight and the city's richest bachelor. Of what we've seen so far, the possibilities for these two sides of his life to clash will be very interesting indeed. Take, for instance, a meeting between Carmine Falcone, the famous Gotham gangster, and Bruce Wayne at a function in front of guests. To maintain his cover, will Bruce play along or honour his principles? And how might that affect the challenges Batman might face if he goes toe to toe with Falcone later? The Telltale engine is looking better than ever with its classic graphic novel look, while the voice cast is naturally excellent. This is a very exciting new title from this team, packed full of potential and looking like a lot of fun.

EA LINES UP ITS **STAR WARS** SLATE

FOUR NEW GAMES ARE ON THE WAY FROM A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY

STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT 2

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** Canada, Sweden **Publisher:** EA
Developer: EA Motive, DICE **Release:** TBC 2017 **Players:** 1-TBC

CONFIRMED BY FORMER *Assassin's Creed* producer Jade Raymond – now heading up a new team for EA – Motive Studios is working with DICE to make a quick follow-up to its first *Star Wars: Battlefront* outing. Her big promise? That the two teams were listening to fans and making sure that the sequel has all of the features and gameplay that they want. We read that as code for, 'There's going to be a single-player campaign this time'. There was a little controversy a few months back when it was revealed that a solo campaign had been planned, but cut so that the game could launch in time for *Star Wars: Episode VII*. This will likely land in time for *Episode VIII*, but with two teams on it, we're not too concerned about anyone cutting corners.

VISCERAL'S STAR WARS

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** EA
Developer: Visceral **Release:** TBC 2018 **Players:** 1-TBC

AMY HENNIG, OF *Uncharted* and *Soul Reaver* fame, had the chance to show off our first glimpse of the third-person action game Visceral has long been working on. The Californian developer is understood to be getting a little support from Jade Raymond's Motive Studios as it enters the final stretch of what has to be one of the most anticipated Star Wars games since the days of *Knights Of The Old Republic*. With Hennig's narrative experience and the *Dead Space* background of the team around her, hopes were going to be high regardless of what the team showed off, but our glimpse was gripping. As an unknown, heavy-coated character steps out into a classic desert town, star destroyer hovering menacingly in the air, and as Tie-fighters zip past, we can instantly tell we're stepping into the height of the galactic empire here. Perhaps the early years of the Empire's rise? Maybe a parallel story to that of Luke, Leia and Han? We'll find out very soon, we hope.

RESPAWN'S STAR WARS

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** EA
Developer: Respawn Entertainment **Release:** 2019 **Players:** 1-TBC

THERE HAD BEEN many rumours about Respawn working on a *Star Wars* title as well as the upcoming *Titanfall 2*, but we had assumed it would be a Battlefront game or some other FPS. As it turns out, Respawn will also be working on a third-person action game like Visceral, albeit in an era of the universe that EA has yet to explore. One interesting detail is that the project is being headed up by Stig Asmussen, formerly of Sony Santa Monica and the *God Of War* franchise. Perhaps that will offer some insight into the type of action Respawn is looking to offer in its new game.

STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT X-WING VR MISSION

Format: PS4 **Origin:** UK **Publisher:** EA **Developer:** Criterion **Release:** September 2016 **Players:** 1-TBC

IN WHAT MUST be one of the more obvious and clear-cut moves into the Star Wars universe, Criterion games is adapting X-Wing fighter gameplay from *Battlefront* into a full cockpit, dog fighting experience for PlayStation VR. What's particularly cool is that if you already own *Star Wars: Battlefront* on PS4, then this VR experience will be completely free to you. For Criterion, it means that the long-awaited *Beyond Cars* project looks to have been shelved. But the idea of getting to be inside an X-Wing is pretty enticing.

IS **HALO WARS 2** DOING ENOUGH TO IMPRESS?

HANDS-ON VERDICT WITH THE RTS RETURN

Format: Xbox One, Windows 10 **Origin:** UK **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios **Developer:** The Creative Assembly, 343 Industries **Release:** 21 February 2017 **Players:** 1-6

THE LACK OF impact The Creative Assembly has had on the core structure of *Halo Wars* is almost as surprising as it is disappointing. Perhaps we were wrong to assume that the studio would look to bring scale, spectacle and political subterfuge to the much-maligned console RTS space - having the architects of *Total War* on a project with so much potential always ran the risk of raising expectations beyond reasonable belief.

It isn't that *Halo Wars 2* is bad, necessarily; just that it bares so many striking similarities to the 2009 Ensemble release that it doesn't feel all that new or progressive. The Creative Assembly has picked right up from where Ensemble left off, replicating the original's streamlined approach to strategy, pad-friendly controls and rock-paper-scissor battles between Halo's various infantry, ground vehicles and aircrafts impressively. It makes sense that Microsoft would want to fall back onto this foundation – *Halo Wars* did, after all, succeed in carving out a niche in the real-time strategy on console space where countless others have tried and failed. But the worth of collaborating with The Creative Assembly on such a highly-anticipated sequel is surely with what the studio could bring to the table were it free to innovate and test convention – caution and trepidation very rarely wins the day when it the heat of battle.

Instead, simplicity is still key in many of *Halo Wars*' core systems and mechanics. Radial menus are still used to expand and manage your base, train troops and construct various vehicles. Pre-assigned hot keys are still assigned to handle everything from troop grouping to movement, while the battles are still won and lost by a simple button press and a hope for the best. Resource management and unit upgrades have been further stripped of their complexity through the removal of the UNSC reactors and Covenant temples – there's now a larger focus on maintaining economic balance with the addition of a new generator type.

Ultimately, there's a strict adherence to the rock-paper-scissors balance, and that too often makes for predictable matches. It can perhaps be difficult to judge the depth of play that'll be available in the full, final release – as more commanders, unit types and game modes are made available – but in the beta too often would games fall into a similar pace to the last. Even the most basic of established strategy tactics are largely irrelevant, the worth of flanking, managing terrain conditions and unit morale hardly seem to be accounted for.

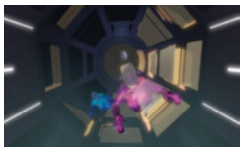
Were *Halo Wars 2* simply coming to console, these omissions may have gone overlooked, but with Creative Assembly bringing the title to Windows 10 we have the uncomfortable feeling that it won't be substantial enough for many PC players to sink their teeth into and far too simple to hold attention of some erratic console gamers. All of this is to say that The Creative Assembly doesn't seem to be bringing enough of its pedigree to *Halo Wars 2*. It's a fun game that feels dated, though your enjoyment will largely depend on whether the novelty of a console-bound RTS has worn off or is still in full effect.

The Creative Assembly has already confirmed that cross-play multiplayer has been ruled out entirely; pitching console players against their keyboard- and mouse-wielding counterparts was deemed to be a challenge too far.

ARROW HEADS

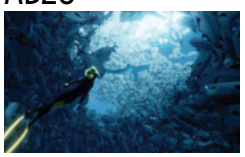
Having won a student game design competition the OddBird team thought it would have a stab at impressing at this year's E3. It worked. Like an isometric take on *TowerFall Ascension*, with added mayhem and humour, *Arrow Heads* is the kind of chaotic, single-screen multiplayer game that we're enjoying more and more.

TACOMA



We got to have another look at *Tacoma*, Fullbright's first release after *Gone Home*, and it's looking more and more interesting. The gameplay has apparently had a major overhaul since the game was first revealed, primarily with how you can interact with AR avatars, rewinding and fast-forwarding their action as you investigate the game's space station.

ABZÛ

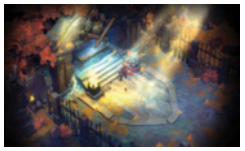


Giant Squid's underwater exploration game turned heads last year, but was a little lost in the noise of E3 this time out. We still noticed it, though, because its clean, high-contrast, colourful art design really makes it stand out. It reminds us a lot of *Journey* as you gradually uncover a dark mystery, albeit under the waves. Really looking forward to this one.

SHATTERED: TALE OF THE FORGOTTEN KING

The first comparison that springs to mind watching Shattered is that it looks like an action-RPG take on *Child Of Light*. The art style is similar and it plays out mostly as a side-on platformer between fights. The key differences are that *Shattered* has an upgrade and crafting system and boss fights are in full 3D. It's an odd and intriguing mix.

BATTLE CHASERS: NIGHTWAR



Mixing fantasy and steampunk styles with classic turn-based RPG gameplay and procedurally-generated dungeons, *Battle Chasers* is proving that it's more than just a genre throwback. It's graphically impressive, of course, but the addition of an overcharge meter in battles opens up some new tactical options. This is one to keep an eye on.

THE RETURN OF THE ARENA SHOOTER

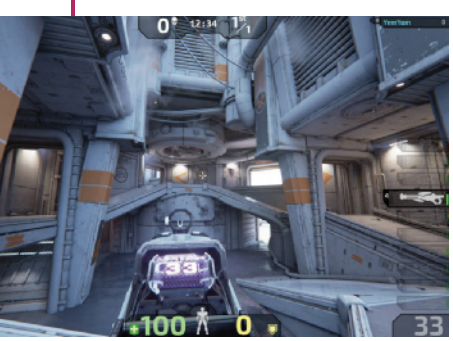
PC GAMING RETURNS TO THE 90S IN STYLE

UNREAL TOURNAMENT

Format: PC **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** Epic Games
Developer: In-house **Release:** 2017 **Players:** 1-12

IT HAS BEEN fascinating to see *Unreal Tournament* grow and evolve over the last two years. Developed by a team that's modest in size and having been altered by community feedback every step of the way on the road to release, *Unreal Tournament* can feel a little light in comparison to its nearest competition. Though that isn't to say that it isn't a whole lot of fun, with fan-favourite weapons returning alongside classic maps and modes.

Unreal Tournament is currently in closed alpha, but it's free to play for anybody that's interested. It's a clear homage to gameplay of years gone by, but anybody looking for something *fresh* may want to look elsewhere. If, on the other hand, you are simply after an excuse to indulge in a nostalgia fragfest then you'll be delighted by what *Unreal Tournament* has to offer.

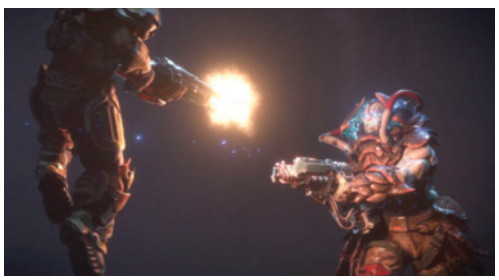


LAWBREAKERS

Format: PC **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** Nexon
Developer: Boss Key **Release:** 2017 **Players:** 1-12

WITH TWO ELITES of the genre coming back on the scene, it can be easy to overlook to new blood. But *Lawbreakers* – from *Gears Of War* creator and *Unreal Tournament* lead designer Cliff Bleszinski – has so much to offer players that it's threatening to show up the competition. In many respects, it feels like *Overwatch* meets an early iteration of *Unreal Tournament*.

It's fast and frantic, eager to push players into tight arena spaces and long corridor firefights. But it's doing more than that, more than what the competition is willing to do – introducing low gravity zones into play that let you revel in scenes of vertical violence. It's a lot of fun but, just like *Overwatch*, it needs to be played to be truly understood or appreciated. *Lawbreakers* is currently in closed beta, though it's well worth signing up – it's challenging, punishing and incredibly hectic, but then again it was never going to be any other way with Bleszinski involved, now was it?



QUAKE CHAMPIONS

Format: PC **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** Bethesda Softworks **Developer:** id Software **Release:** 2017 **Players:** TBC

AFTER KILLING IT with modern reboots of *Wolfenstein* and *Doom*, Bethesda is finally returning to the brand that helped establish multiplayer shooters to begin with: *Quake*. Designed to be a competitive arena-style FPS for PC, *Quake Champions* is going to bring back the furious action first made famous back in 1996.

"Whether you are new to *Quake* or have been fragging for the last 20 years, *Quake Champions* will give you the challenge and rush you'd expect from id Software multiplayer games," said studio director of id Software, Tim Willits; perhaps revealing the toughest challenge in front of the studio. Arena shooters are having something of a comeback right now, though they have a lot to learn from modern advancements in the field. Like the MOBA craze and Blizzard's *Overwatch*, *Quake Champions* is set to feature a "diverse cast of warriors each with different attributes and unique abilities", though whether the addition of such features dilutes the core *Quake* experience does, of course, remain to be seen. Either way, it's exciting to see yet another forefather of the FPS returning and we can't wait to see more of the eSport-focused shooter later in the year.

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MIRROR'S EDGE CATALYST

DICE brings its parkour action to the open world, but will a larger canvas enhance or hinder the core mechanics of the original?

THE AVERAGE

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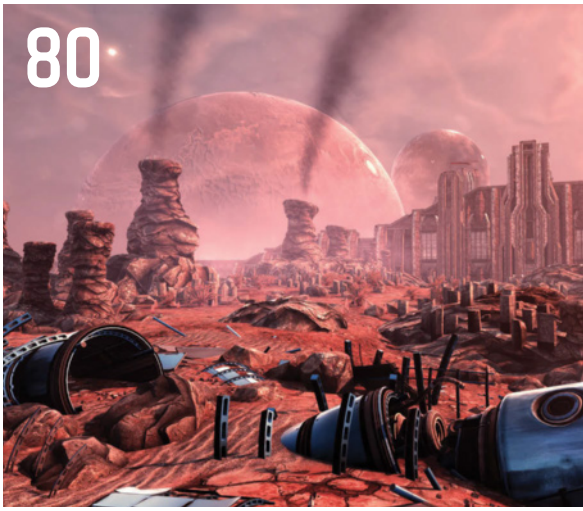

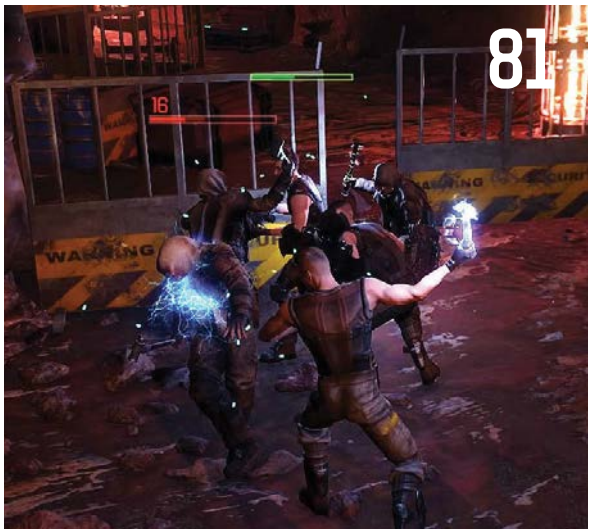

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A LEAP OF FAITH

Mirror's Edge: Catalyst

It's easy to lose faith in an open world, especially one as sterile as The City Of Glass, as obstinately gorgeous as it may be. There is an essential banality to *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst*'s core design, the structure of its space at continuous odds with its gameplay ambitions. Developer DICE may look to reaffirm the belief that allowing the player to do whatever it wants – whenever it wants to do it – is necessary to compete in the adventure gaming space in 2016, though the resulting experience is one that stumbles far more frequently than it soars.

The original *Mirror's Edge* was a celebration of the critical path. Stark colours and straight lines: that was all it took to get DICE's deeply divisive game embedded in the minds of millions. Admittedly, it may have served better as a proof of concept demonstration more than a game actually fit for release – a series of serious flaws actively worked against its elegance. But *Mirror's Edge* captured the hearts and attention of a generation hungry for new experiences, especially amongst the gluttony of shooters arriving in 2008. And so we collectively demanded more: more of Faith, of an open-world and the freedom to explore the uncluttered rooftops at our leisure. Eight years have passed and DICE has delivered on these demands; and yet eight years later we can't help but wish the studio had never listened to our cries. *Catalyst* acts as a stark reminder that the only thing we are ever really entitled to as fans of a franchise is a memory of it.

Here we are, overlooking The City Of Glass' from its most nausea-inducing position, teetering on the edge of a skyscraper, as we desperately attempt to ignore the NPCs incessantly whining about some totalitarian social injustice or another – one that can only be stopped by delivering parcels to patrons of the city that dwell on its cascading rooftops. Instead we are keeping our attention locked on a ribbon floating off across the antiseptic environments. Everything it touches splashed in red; a runner vision beacon that removes the thrill of exploration, but provides a helping hand across *Catalyst*'s many impossible leaps and landings. The visual language of *Mirror's Edge* is as strong as it ever has been, a unique approach to spatial navigation when compared to just about everything else in the industry. But it's the play (not the look) that *Mirror's Edge* built its notoriety around and *Catalyst* does a pretty solid job of making you freer than you ever have been in a videogame.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

COMBAT SHIFT: Battling grunts might not be any fun, but at least we aren't wrestling with its awful shooting mechanics anymore.

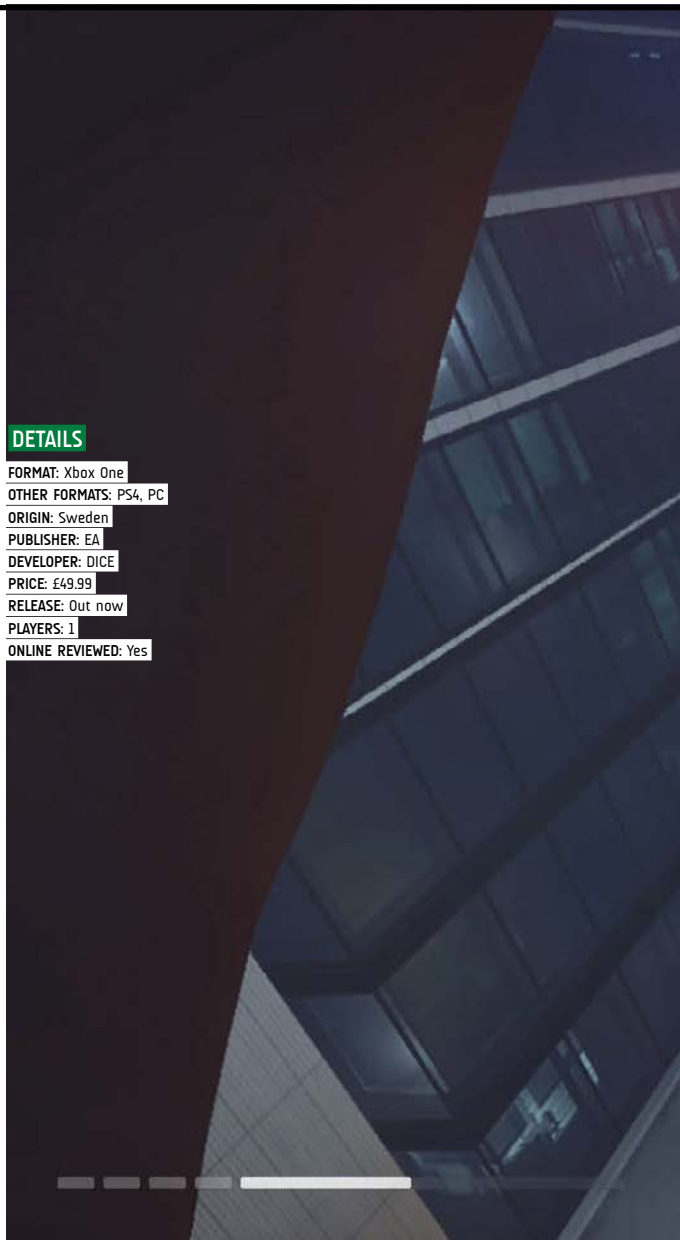
The first-person parkour from the original game returns essentially unaltered. What it lacks in depth it makes up in form and spirit. *Mirror's Edge* has a habit of betraying you with its simplicity, the perspective shift distracting from the fact that you're still navigating everything with a push forward of the analogue stick and the press of a single button. Ultimately, it requires little more skill than, say, *Assassin's Creed* – though timing can be the difference between life, death and coming to a total, frustrating standstill. In spite of this, it's liberating to move so freely across a space. It's often awe-inspiring and exciting, even if traversal does begin to quickly stagnate as a result of *Catalyst*'s boring mission, narrative and open-world design.

Mirror's Edge was linear, almost to a fault. You moved through levels, comfortable in the knowledge that every environment was a puzzle to be conquered, an occasional time trial ready to test your understanding of its navigation systems – even if it ran out of steam before it had a chance to conclude. *Catalyst*, on the other hand, struggles to convert this central hook of fluid motion and momentum into its newfound sprawling game world in an engaging fashion.

Like most open world games, open up your map after a few hours of play and you'll

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: DICE
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



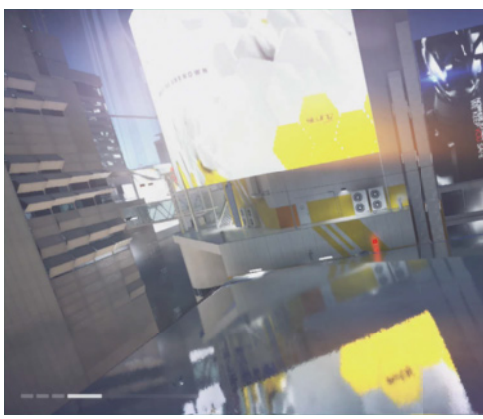
Above: The MAG Rope gadget is a great addition, though you can only use it when the game lets you. Opening up its use around the city would have been preferable.

AS GOOD AS

THIEF

WORSE THAN

MIRROR'S EDGE



Right: Combat is weak. Tying it directly to momentum was a smart move, though why DICE forces players into battles in tight spaces is a mystery. *Catalyst* just didn't need combat, at all.

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DICE HAS MADE SOME STRANGE CONCESSIONS WITH THE SHIFT TO A BLAND OPEN-WORLD STRUCTURE

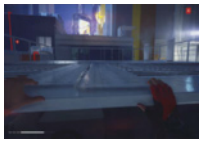
TECHNICALLY FLAWED

Mirror's Edge: Catalyst commits a cardinal sin. It's a game that features a very stripped-back hub, presenting slick action at an incredibly fast pace. With only a small circular reticule to focus on, it can be all too easy to fall victim to the horrors of motion sickness. This also isn't helped by frame-rate that has a habit of jumping and stuttering at random, which can make your stomach lurch. In some games, frame-rate problems could be potentially overlooked, but in one where being immersed is one of the only elements that stands between you and vomit on your shoes, it becomes a fundamental problem. The Xbox One version is in desperate need of further optimisation.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

10 MINS



Feels great to be back with *Mirror's Edge*, it's been far too long! Parkour is smooth and the city seems massive. We've genuinely missed this kind of movement.

5 HOURS

The city is big and the full scope of it is opening up to us now. It hasn't been filled with very much to do of any real interest, mind. Pretty disappointing, if we're honest.

1 DAY

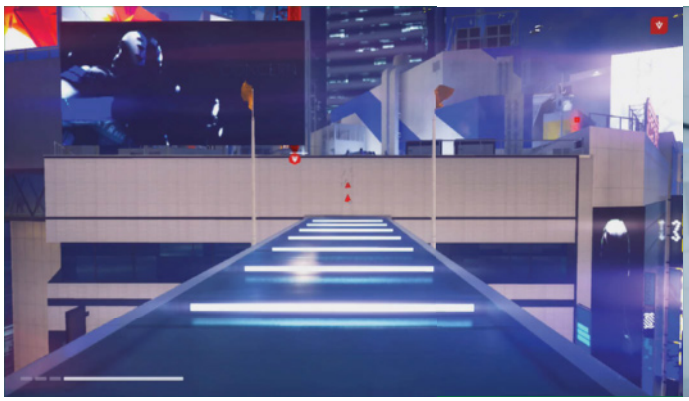
Mirror's Edge: Catalyst draws to its big climax. It was a slog that only the most devout of Faith fan will want to follow into the depths of collectible gathering hell, though.

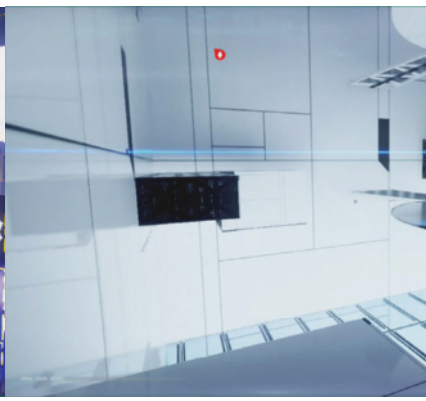
Below: While *Catalyst* does often look stunning, scenes of destruction look unspectacular, which is surprising considering it's running on the same engine powering *Battlefield 1* and *Mass Effect: Andromeda*.

Above: *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst* might let you explore an entire city, but DICE has failed to fill it with anything much to see or challenging things to do. This mission design is poor, the design of the city repetitive.

GOT GADGETS?

One of the best additions to *Mirror's Edge* comes in the form of a grappling hook-style gadget that you unlock fairly early into the experience. The MAG rope launcher gives you the opportunity to zip quickly across large spaces, giving you even more traversal options – especially as K-Sec squads are chasing you relentlessly. Towards the end of the game, DICE relies far too heavily on the device – putting you in death-trap scenarios where you either lean on it entirely or find yourself staring at a lengthy load screen as it pulls you back to a checkpoint. Ultimately, anything *Catalyst* can do to keep you moving in the open world is a positive. If only there was something worth moving towards.





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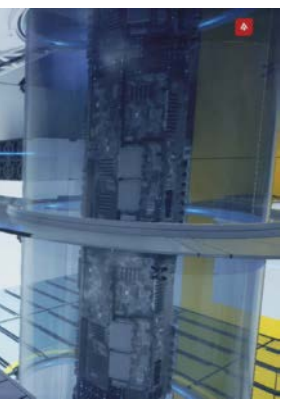
be accosted by a mess of icons: a time trial here, a collectable there; billboards to hack and a side-missions to complete over there. You can even create your own challenges, shared and played by the masses via Catalyst's asynchronous multiplayer element. At a glance, there's plenty of content here – it's just a crying shame that almost all of it is crushingly repetitive.

DICE has clearly done its best to respond to the criticism levied at the original game's narrative – removing the animated cutscenes entirely and making some attempt to tell a more personal story for the once again underdeveloped Faith – ultimately, though, it's still as mind-numbingly dull. The story itself is overblown as debts need to be paid and cities saved, though the side-quests aren't much better either. Even the simple act of making a delivery for an NPC can be aggressively intrusive, their inescapable lines of dialogue and ranting a distraction as you attempt to jump and slide your way to a delivery point against the clock. You'll quickly find yourself distancing yourself from certain mission types to avoid coming into contact with NPCs entirely, but that then has a catastrophic affect on progression.

DICE has made some strange concessions with the migration of *Mirror's Edge* into a bland open-world structure. While you can now delight in smooth, limitless free running across the map for minutes without restraint, many of Faith's most famous and basic parkour abilities are locked behind an upgrade tree. That means that a move as integral as the 180-degree turn or double wall run is kept out of reach until you have enough EXP to unlock it – a needless addition. The game goes to great lengths to set up the notion that Faith is a parkour master – a legend in the city – but shatters the illusion almost instantly by gating off such integral, basic abilities.

WHEN IT COMES TO COMBAT, CATALYST GRINDS TO AN UNSATISFYING HALT



Ultimately, *Catalyst*'s newfound structure doesn't sit well with the gameplay loop DICE is so clearly, passionately trying to build. There are only so many ways and times you can climb the same drainpipe or ladder as you head back to a safe house; only so many roofs to run and leap across to before you begin craving structured challenge. The game is largely unpopulated, lacking sign of real humanity or emotion – there's a crushing lack of variety to the various hubs, every area looks like the one you've just sprinted through. It's lonely when you're running free on the top of the world, and it isn't long before you begin to feel oddly dissociated from the space you are occupying.

There are flashes of greatness of what could have been. There is one line of side quests, the Grid Node puzzles, which are removed from the banality of open world that instantly delight. They are pure platforming challenges; brainteasers that force you to use your understanding of traversal to navigate spaces not fit for human feet. It's here where *Catalyst* settles into a rhythm, not unlike the structured scenes witnessed in the original *Mirror's Edge*'s best missions. You are asked to use everything at your disposal to make death-defying leaps across complicated catwalks and around security lasers. It's during these missions that DICE sets the parameters of challenge, leaning on its mastery of level design to make *Catalyst* feel as it should: effortlessly cool, exciting and stomach-churning all at the same time. A game such as *Mirror's Edge* lives and dies on its level design, and it's an aspect of the game that became a casualty to structure shift.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

STRUCTURE: *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst* would have worked better were it more focused around linear, challenging puzzles.

You will often encounter levels built as grand puzzles separated from the main hub during critical story missions as well. While they are considerably larger than any scenarios you may have seen in the original game, they fail on two fairly fundamental levels that speak to larger flaws in DICE's vision. Not only do they force you to interact directly and constantly with an array of aggressively unlikable characters and plot lines, but its enjoyable traversal puzzles almost always end in large scenes of violence.

When it comes to combat, *Catalyst* grinds to an unsatisfying halt. DICE has, thankfully, removed Faith's ability to wield weapons though it has introduced a melee system that isn't worth a damn. During occasions where the security gates come crashing down – where you are locked in rooms with groups of enemies – the combat system essentially breaks down, forcing you to mash X and Y in a flail of disembodied hands and feat until your assailants crumble to the floor in an embarrassingly lifeless fashion. Connecting punches and kicks has very little kinetic feedback, making Faith feel (again) disconnected from the space she is inhabiting.

When combat finds you in the open world it's handled a little more intuitively, the more momentum you build the faster your 'Runner's Shield' builds, making it harder for enemies to damage you as long as you're on the run. It encourages you to keep moving, to avoid combat and use the environment to escape conflict – it feels great to lose a cavalcade of armoured goons by taking a leap of faith, triggering a roll just in time to land safety and disappearing off into the distance. Why then, does it put you in scenarios where you can't run? Where you don't have enough space to gain momentum or use the environment to your advantage? Direct combat is weightless and boring, it's a wonder it – and scenes of wave-based survival – ever made it into the game to begin with.

Catalyst is at its best when it is integrating a sense of athleticism into its natural flow, as it empowers the player to take chances and revel in the danger and spectacle of free running. It's a shame then, that its best moments are almost entirely undone by the open world environment. The sense of challenge, the accuracy and sense of precision that makes the series feel so daring becomes a casualty of DICE's need to pander to players. The open spaces must be easy to navigate, less players will fall and fail. They might get lost and frustrated. They will misjudge a jump and become twisted in a series of sections that look indiscriminately alike. This comes together to make Faith quickly feel like less of a parkour legend in the City of Glass, but more like a clumsy runner that just so happens to haphazardly frequent its rooftops.

Mirror's Edge was a fantastic technical demonstration back in 2008, highlighting a cool concept and impressive new technology. Ultimately, given the sense of pace in imbued the player with – the feeling of freedom and limitless potential – we shouted and screamed for it to go into an open world. We wanted freedom and exploration, collectibles and the like – DICE listened, clearly. But it shouldn't have. There's a reason EA left this franchise on the sidelines for the better part of a decade, and it might be because *Mirror's Edge*'s best mechanics and systems are better served in a smaller, limited environmental space. *Catalyst* has some wonderful ideas and there are times where it'll make you feel truly free, but it fails to maintain its momentum for more than a few minutes at time.

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
If you're just going through the main missions, *Catalyst* can be completed in eight hours.

Q. IS THIS A SEQUEL?
While it's essentially a reboot, it also acts as a prequel of sorts diving deeper into Faith's back-story.

Q. HOW IS THE STORY?
It's truly awful. If you thought it was bad in the original game, *Catalyst* is somehow worse.

VERDICT

FAILS TO FIND ITS FLOW OR RHYTHM

6

gamesTMmag scored **6** for Mirror's Edge: Catalyst

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

FAQs

Q. IS IT LONG?

There are five loosely connected episodes to solve, but plenty to discover within each of those.

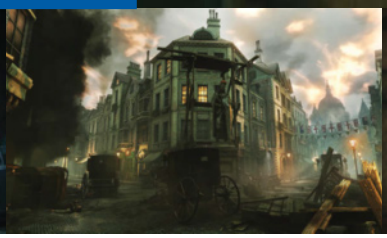
Q. MULTIPLE ENDINGS?

Yes, though the impact of your decisions is hardly an emotional investment. You might consider playing through for the 'perfect' solution to each episode.

Q. DIFFICULT?

As long as you find all the clues, you're given enough to make the right decision – but you're never quite sure until the end if you made the right call.

IF YOU'VE EVER CONSIDERED PLAYING ONE OF THE SHERLOCK HOLMES GAMES, THERE'S NO BETTER OPTION TO START WITH



NEW LOOK

If you've been a fan of the series already then you may notice a difference with the two characters Sherlock and Watson. They've been redesigned to appeal to the much trendier image of Sherlock that we are now more familiar with these days, liberally using the Victorian London setting for something distinctly more stylish. We likely have Robert Downey Jr and Benedict Cumberbatch to thank for that. The voice actor for Sherlock has been changed too, and it has to be said that he does a good job of finding the balance between broken waster and unstoppable genius. The change might help appeal to a wider audience based on the box in a store, but as with all aesthetic shifts, it doesn't really alter the gameplay experience.

Above: The open environments also add a new type of puzzle for the series: finding where you're going. It's a fun way to introduce exploration, and another type of puzzle-solving added to the game that is used in many different ways.

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IT'S IN THE DETAILS

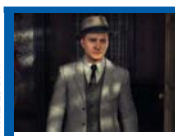
Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Ukraine
PUBLISHER: Bigben Interactive
DEVELOPER: Frogwares
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
SHERLOCK HOLMES: CRIMES & PUNISHMENTS

WORSE THAN
L.A. NOIRE



Below: The ability to explore the game's environments more wholly in semi-open world format might seem like an unnecessary addition, but it does help to add to the atmosphere of Victorian London far more than the series has before.

It's so strange to witness a series of games continually improve but never really get any better. It's such a contradiction that should be impossible, especially in an industry like this. The Sherlock Holmes games have become better in individual areas with every new release, whether that's better graphics, more intricate puzzles or brand new features that – really, truly, honestly – offer something new for the puzzle adventure genre. And yet *still* it manages to fall short each time, just one step away from a wider appeal.

Crimes And Punishments, the last game in the series, really helped the franchise stand out, offering a surprisingly robust puzzler built out of the world famous universe of Holmes and Watson. *The Devil's Daughter* follows that same trend, improving the quality in a number of ways, but – true to form – it just doesn't quite make it far enough beyond that threshold into 'must-have'. In terms of the puzzling, well this is easily the series' best. *The Devil's Daughter* builds upon its predecessor's intriguing elements, enhancing elements such as Sherlock's famous skills of observation and deduction. The former provides a more in-depth clue detection, building into an *L.A. Noire* style evidence system that you'll be able to utilise in your questioning with the game's NPCs. This combines with extra abilities, from eavesdropping to visualising crime scenes, to make for a much wider range of puzzles to solve.

Deduction, on the other hand, hasn't been improved as such, at least in terms of mechanics. It still utilises the same system found in *Crimes And Punishments* (now titled the 'Mind Palace', after Holmes' famous innate skill) but here it evolves the prior game's binary decision-making and really alters the story. Now it's much easier to come across the incorrect answer, meaning that you'll need to mimic the investigator's art of deduction for yourself if you're to reach the right verdict. And even then you're provided a moral decision, shifting from the 'absolving or comdemning' of a criminal into more personal choices – such as an early one involving telling a child of his father's death or not. This moral choice plays more heavily on the outcome of the game's story too, a facet of the game that has been refined to provide a much more compelling tale.

The Devil's Daughter still suffers at the hands of the same restrictions the series has had to endure before, though. As much as the graphics have improved there's still poor animation and voice acting, a disappointment when so much effort has been made to reinvent Holmes and Watson and focus on telling a more involved story than before. In terms of atmosphere, though, this is the greatest the series has achieved so far. Rather than individual places or events to explore, environments are on a much grander scale with interiors and exteriors connected to one another, open for exploration. It's mostly cosmetic but it still adds a little more to the experience since it's now possible to fully integrate yourself into the world of Sherlock Holmes, especially when you're expected to ask the citizens busying about the streets for directions to a particular location. That in itself adds another element of puzzling to the game, and helps bring Victorian London more vividly into view. Honestly, as already mentioned, this the best the series has been.

And yet there are those *faults*. Ropey quality with animation and VA aside, it would be enough for *The Devil's Daughter*'s enhanced mechanics and focus on story alone to improve the franchise, but sadly Frogwares felt the need to add in a number of rather unnecessary extras, a la Telltale. The multiple skill-based mini-games that are used to activate certain gameplay elements, the twin-stick balancing act needed to successfully eavesdrop...

These needless additions only serve to add an unwanted need for skill that is incongruous not only with the series' tradition but the genre as a whole. These elements can be overlooked on easier difficulties, but for the full experience it's as though Frogwares felt the series couldn't rely on puzzles alone to appeal to a larger market. The same must be true for the addition of equally unwanted stealth or action sequences, too, from tailing someone as street urchin Wiggins to utilising Sherlock's detection vision to find the right route through a swamp to find cover from a gunman.

There are few moments where these parts add to the experience, often feeling like a forced and executive attempt to 'mix things up'. *L.A. Noire* aside, there are few puzzle adventure games that have been able to successfully implement such action without ever feeling like an added chore, and *The Devil's Daughter* is no different. These events are at the very least playable, but alter the pace and not in a positive manner.

It's perhaps an attempt by Frogwares to really push its franchise into the mainstream, and that's a commendable goal. The series has steadily been gaining popularity over the last handful of iterations and it's about time the developer was given its dues, but it needs to understand where it can find its victories and focus on that. For the time being, the Sherlock Holmes series will remain relegated to the more obscure scale for fans of this particular breed of puzzle adventure titles. All the same, this is by far the best of the franchise so far and if you've ever considered giving one of the Sherlock Holmes games a go there's been no better option to start with.

Above: The overall story isn't a typical Sherlock Holmes adventure, but it's still an interesting one all the same.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

IT'S ELEMENTARY: Sherlock Holmes is a fascinating character, one that can be utilised well in a videogame. The ability to deduce your own conclusion to a situation is fascinating, however, and relies on feeling as much as evidence.

VERDICT

THE BEST YET, BUT STILL SHORT OF GREATNESS

gamesTMmag scored **7** for
Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

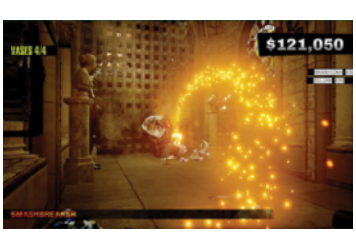
Catch stacked items at just the right angle and all sorts of domino-effect madness can ensue as the physics driven objects begin colliding and interacting with one another.

MESSY, BUT DELIGHTFUL

Dangerous Golf

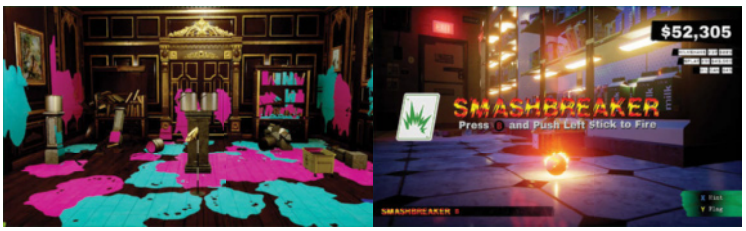
There are a lot of things *Dangerous Golf* could do better, but being more fun isn't one of them. It could be tighter, more varied, faster and so on, but despite a few shortcomings, it manages to deliver in the engagement and hilarity stakes. *Dangerous Golf* joins a stable of light, easy-going experiences this generation that demand little from the player in terms of skill or dedication, but delivers plenty in terms of reward and exhilaration.

The term 'playable' has to be one of the most unhelpful and nondescriptive terms used about a game we could think of, but it keeps coming to mind. *Dangerous Golf* is very playable. By which we mean it's a comfortable sort of challenging. It's a satisfying kind of simple. It has just the right combination of skill, luck, puzzling and experimentation to keep it compelling. And it has just the right amount of tinkering with game modes and styles to keep itself fresh too. The deeper you get into playing *Dangerous Golf*, the more you're likely to want to keep playing it; it will have its hooks in you.



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Three Fields Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



The only thing really likely to throw you from the thrill ride is some of the technical limitations of the game and the overall lack of depth. Loading times weren't great at launch, but some of that is being addressed and optimised. Given the amount of physics-propelled objects every stage has to render with each visit, we can understand why this would be the case, but it did slow the momentum of the experience. And the original concept of smacking a golf ball around highly destructible environments only has so many permutations. This isn't a game that's breaking boundaries or showing something that feels truly revolutionary. It's compact and confident, and that's enough.

As Dangerous Golf begins to build on its core mechanics – causing as much damage and mayhem as you can before putting the ball in a hole to bank your score – it continues to deliver a fresh take on the concept. Leaving sticky bombs behind you as you propel the ball from wall to wall for instance, or multi-hole speed rounds that demand a little precision as well as quick strategic thinking about the order you should work in. And the levels themselves, while few in number and repeated heavily, are kept interesting by a new assortment of objects, hazard zones you can't touch, warp points and more. Three Fields has worked within limitations of time, tech and resources and still managed to squeeze this mad concept for all it's worth. Sometimes it shows the signs of those limitations and that's all that's holding it back, but it remains a game we recommend.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

QUICK RESET: While technically challenging given the number of physical objects to be replaced and set each time you begin a hole, an improved form of quick re-try button would be a small, but impactful addition.

VERDICT

UNREFINED, BUT LIGHT, FUN AND CHAOTIC

8

gamesTMmag scored **8** for Dangerous Golf

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AN EXERCISE IN MEDIOCRITY

Mighty No 9

***Mighty No. 9* is the closest thing to the "classic" *Megaman* experience available in 2016, with *MegaMan X* a clear influence on many aspects of the game's design.** While fans of *Megaman* will probably be smitten, *Mighty No. 9* is a hard game to love. It's rooted in the platforming magic of the early Nineties, though it seems to have adopted some of the era's flaws too; *Mighty No. 9* is spectacularly hard and unforgiving.

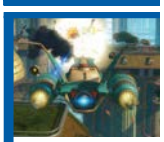
It owes a debt to the past for its simplistic story too. You play as Beck (and later his partner, Call), the ninth in a series of combat robots called the Mighty Numbers. A computer virus attacks these Mighty Numbers, pushing Beck to fight his way through the robots and find the culprit, with each Mighty Number you take out granting you a new ability. Once you're through the first mission (that serves as a tutorial of sorts), you can take on the Mighty Numbers in any order you choose. In theory, this should give the game some replayability as you try to beat the game in a different order with alternate powers, though you'll find very little reason to.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Mac, Linux, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Xbox One, Wii U
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Deep Silver
DEVELOPER: Comcept
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: NA

BETTER THAN

ASSASSIN'S CREED CHRONICLES: INDIA



WORSE THAN

RATCHET AND CLANK

You run through a variety of different levels, although sadly the visual presentation is lacking. The game looks ropey at the best of times and – in addition to the graphics looking tired – it's difficult to read the on-screen action. You can dash through enemies to absorb certain powers after injuring them with your blaster but, beyond a small icon, the game makes little effort to explain what those powers do or why you might want to use them.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

GOTTA GO FAST: When enemies are injured you dash through them to absorb temporary enhancements. Combo-dashing enemies lets you nab high scores and you can dash across gaps.

It feels unfair to hate on a game just because it's difficult, but *Mighty No. 9* feels designed to be unnecessarily punishing. Many of your deaths will feel cheap – a collapsing tower could crush you, or a mis-timed dash could lead to a boss skewering you on an attack you didn't yet recognise the pattern for. This wouldn't be a big problem, except for the fact that when you run out of lives (and you rarely have more than two or three), you'll be dumped back to the start of the level to do it all over again. If you're trying to learn the patterns of a boss, it quickly becomes infuriating.

Levels become a war of attrition, a carnival of your own suffering as you move through levels desperately trying to learn and navigate every threat before it kills you. Die too many times? Back to the start you go. While it can feel rewarding to eventually squash a boss, you'll very rarely be having fun while doing so – and that's a feeling that carries through the entire experience.

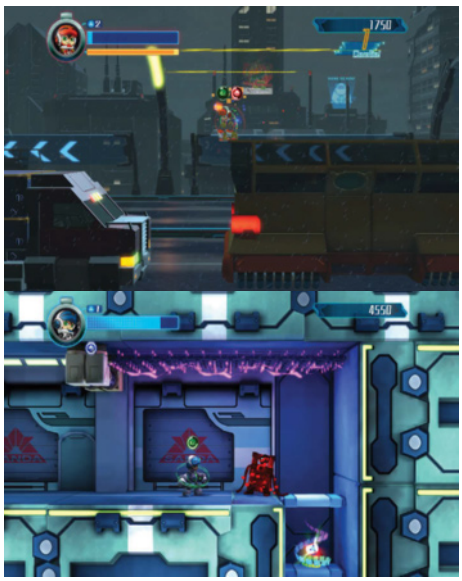
VERDICT

THERE AREN'T ENOUGH DELAYS TO SAVE THIS GAME

6

gamesTMmag scored **6** for Mighty No 9

Follow our scores on JUSTA SCORE



Above: Bosses all have a unique tempo, with their own set of attacks you'll need to learn to defeat them. Some of these attacks can have very little in the way of visual communication, so you'll frequently get blindsided while learning.

ADORABLE MECHS? YES PLEASE!

Kirby: Planet Robobot

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: HAL Laboratories
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

We could sit here and worry that Kirby in a mech suit is going to make what can be an easy series even easier. You could point out that this seems like, in both structure and execution, it has a lot in common with Kirby's last 3DS outing *Triple Deluxe*. Sunstones are now Code Cubes, which you need to unlock the end of world boss and rather than keychains you collect stickers, which can be used to customise your Robobot. Sure, we could, and just did, point out all of these things, but you know what? It doesn't matter. None of that matters at all because this game not only retains the fun we had with *Triple Deluxe* it adds new features both stylistic and gameplay-wise making this one of the best Kirby games we've ever played.

Planetary invasion by robots has never looked so cute, but the story isn't the main driving force. The gameplay is the star here, light enough to be relaxing and hard enough to keep your mind engaged. This has always been a key part of the success of a modern Kirby game; it's almost like a meditative experience at points as a colourful world blasts by to a beautiful soundtrack.

The robot suit is a joy to control and the first time you get it is wonderful moment of release. After avoiding traps and enemies, sucking up every star you can get hold of to dispatch your foes, things get mechanised. Hop in the suit and suddenly nothing is a problem, you can dash forward, destroy everything with mighty punches while still absorbing your enemies and their powers.

It never outstays its welcome though and just when it feels like you've probably done enough smashing you have to get out of the suit and traverse areas only Kirbs can get through. Your robosuit leads to some brilliant variety: an *R-Type*-like shooting section, racing through hills and over jumps as the suit transforms in to a car. There are, however, still plenty of levels that don't use the suit at all and are still a lot of fun.

Outside of the main campaign there are a few extra modes included. Kirby 3D Rumble has you battling waves of enemies in an arena, though it passes by quite quickly. Team Kirby Clash is a lot of fun and, notably, includes the still-magical ability for friends without the cartridge to play the game with you, with up to four Kirbys with different abilities taking on bosses as the difficulty goes up. Every new world is a delight and with the amount of surprises the game threw at us in terms of its visual design, world and joyous soundtrack we honestly didn't want to stop playing.

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

AMIIBO LOVE: amiibo support not only extends to the new line of Kirby amiibos, but every single amiibo will either give you a character specific or random power up for Kirby to use.

VERDICT

BEAUTIFUL, FUN AND KIRBY'S BEST GAME

8

gamesTMmag scored **8** for Kirby: Planet Robobot

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Above: Once again, HAL Laboratories has done an amazing job in creating the kind of light, engaging and deceptively simple action game that anyone can enjoy. Its track record is pretty incredible.

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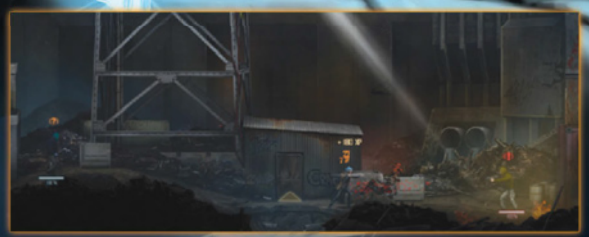

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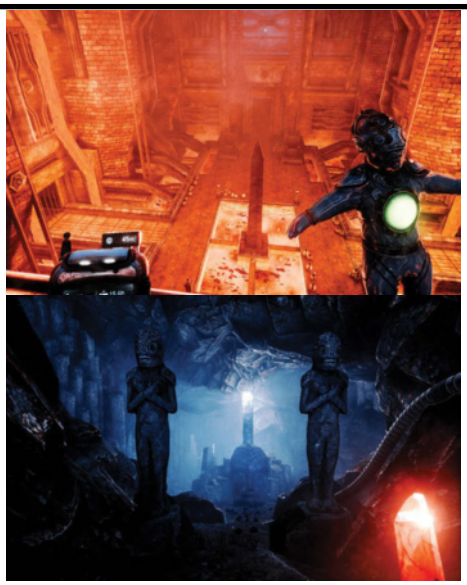


Above: Gliese is frequently bleak, but there do exist moments that take you genuinely by surprise. When something unusual happens in an area that you think you know well the impact is significant enough to make you question your understanding.

EXPLORING THE END OF THE WORLD

The Solus Project

Along with the rest of our solar system, Earth was destroyed in 2151. It took 15 years for the Solus Project, humanity's last hope of survival, to arrive at Gliese – a planet with an atmosphere harbouring the potential to support our species. Upon entry, the shuttle carrying Octavia Sken explodes, leaving her abandoned, but alive, on the alien planet with no indication that her shipmates had clung to life. The rest of the fleet is presumably still orbiting in space. Making contact with them is the priority.

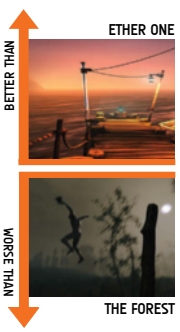
Thus begins *The Solus Project*, a game of exploration and survival that offers a backstory of typical sci-fi but quickly reveals itself as something altogether different from the multitude of first-person survival games vying for attention on Steam. Most powerfully, it manages to fade its survival elements (eat, drink, stay warm) into the background, only highlighting their existence when you realise that your life is in real danger. Certainly you need to take care of yourself, but doing so isn't overly taxing once you've figured out what Sken can withstand.

What this approach creates is an environment and atmosphere in which you feel inspired and able to explore this new world around you. Freed from the drudgery of having to micromanage your every step for fear of sudden death, you're able to absorb what you quickly realise is a thoughtfully crafted world layered with intrigue and history in such a way as to allow for equal parts narrative digestion and extrapolation. By no means is this a creation that explicitly tells you everything and, in large part, what it keeps hidden is more haunting and provocative than what it shows. The planet itself seems to be deserted despite numerous and obvious signs that some form of well-developed life has existed here, the whole landscape at times seemingly having been transformed into an art project by creative minds. Piecing together what happened here is just as important to the experience as learning the backstory of Sken's mission and seeking a way to rejoin what is left of humanity, orbiting above you.

These narrative elements combine to form a whole that is explicitly trying to present some form of philosophical message as you simultaneously hunt for clues of a lost past as well as seek a means of continuing into the future. At times this discussion is undermined by the presentation of text logs that are written with questionable quality and often fail to hold your attention to the point where you're excited to read the next one. Still, these messages are not so bad that they completely turn you off from proceedings and, for certain, the world itself is built in such a way that exploration is genuinely interesting. It's that exploration, rather than any promised pay off, that makes *The Solus Project* worth the effort for curious minds.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One
ORIGIN: Czech Republic
PUBLISHER: Teotl Studios
DEVELOPER: Grip Games
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Dual Core 2GHZ+, 4GB RAM, DirectX10 Compatible 3D Card (minimum GeForce 460 or equivalent), 11GB HDD space.
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

UNDERSTATED: No fear has been shown here when it comes to making the survival elements as light as possible in order to allow your mind to be carried away by the game's world and history.

VERDICT

A BRAVE, DIFFERENT TWIST ON THE SURVIVAL GENRE

8

gamesTMmag scored **8** for The Solus Project

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

Right: Staying warm, dry, fed and watered are essential to survival, but achieving these basic needs is not so difficult as is often the case in other games of this sort. After a couple of hours you're well educated in how to stay alive.

Combat is great fun, but it only takes a few hits to take you down so save often. Most of your extra powers (such as Palpatine-esque bolts of lightning) are accessible by shoulder buttons –it seems complicated but it works in the flow of a fight.

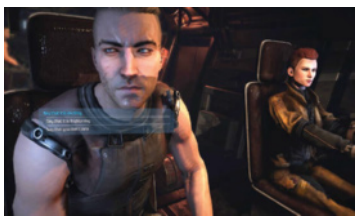
AMBITIOUS SCI-FI RPG THAT WON'T HAVE A MASS EFFECT

The Technomancer

Spiders knows how to dream big. From combat systems you can flip between on the fly, to a sci-fi story that tries to tackle the concept of burying the truth to protect the greater good, the dev wants you to know just how exciting its brainstorming sessions were when *The Technomancer* was born. In execution, this action-RPG romp isn't quite so grand. Spend any amount of time in its dystopian Martian setting, where society has been divided thanks to a monopoly of a scarce water supply, and you'll find yourself walking streets and following story missions you've tackled in a hundred other science fiction settings. Much like the game it serves as a sequel of sorts to – 2013's forgettable *Mars: War Logs* – *The Technomancer* is a series of hopeful glimmers drowning in a sea of undercooked and overused ideas.

As an action-RPG in 2016, it offers all the mod cons you'd expect from the genre – skill trees, customisable weapons and crafting and NPC-filled squads are in attendance, but none of them offer anything new or innovative. Being able to upgrade and recycle components from weapons is a neat touch, but it's hardly going to give even last generation's *Mass Effect* a run for its credits. Morality never feels that important, either – a direct result of the game often failing to present a tangible impact of your choices or actions – thus you never feel truly invested in your contribution to the future of Mars. A fact made all the more frustrating by the cumbersome script and clichéd story that practically baits you to skip its wooden dialogue.

There are moments of success that give us hope, though – however well hidden – placing you in the shoes of the previous game's antagonists offers a chance to see a larger slice of the Martian conflict. Operating within the elitist world of the upper class Abundance adds an intriguing spin on the universe Spiders is trying to create, but its story beats are so familiar (powerful toffs have all the power, rebels fight back, main character rubs chin while pondering his allegiance) you can almost hear the voice actors sighing after each line.



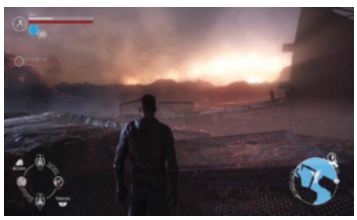
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Focus Home Interactive
DEVELOPER: Spiders
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

EXPLORATION: Mars might not be the title anymore, but it's still your setting for the game. We were crying out for more of a chance to explore the landscape, so open-world vehicular sections would have been ideal.



Despite its lacklustre story and painful script, *The Technomancer* does have one area that it shines in: combat. Taking the triple stance system from its previous game, *Bound By Flame*, Spiders gives the electrical melee brawls of Mars a supercharge. Being able to flit between all three (Rogue for guerrilla attacks, Guardian for CQC and Warrior for crowd control) and electrify your weapons to boot makes each fight a blast. You can see Spiders wants to create something grand in *The Technomancer*, but the execution still feels very much like a last-gen offering. It's by no means a terrible game, but rather an over-ambitious title whose lofty goals are hampered by a limited budget and a small planet's worth of clichéd ideas.

VERDICT

GOOD FOR A FIGHT, DULL FOR EVERYTHING ELSE

5 gamesTMmag scored **5** for The Technomancer

Follow our scores on JUSTASCORE

#SUPERGROUP #MASHUP

Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE

In the strange world of Atlus' Wii-exclusive RPG every stage is... well, a stage. Its heroes are artists, actors and singers. And humans have within them the power of Performa – magical energy that those capable of harnessing it can use for good or evil. On the evil side of the equation are the Mirages, malevolent spirits hell-bent on harvesting Performa by abducting hundreds of people at a time. As the curtain raises we find main character, Itsuki Aoi, amid one such mass abduction, only to be rescued by Fire Emblem's Chrom – not the most likely guardian angel.

During battles, Chrom, Tharja, Cain and other Fire Emblem stalwarts manifest themselves as swords and spears, thereby granting Itsuki and friends to unleash an assortment of special attacks. Defeating enemies is rewarded with various types of Performa, which are used to unlock ever more powerful weapons that Chrom, etc, can morph into. The key to success is using each weapon in battle until Itsuki and the other heroes, learn their unique skills. Once mastered, a skill can be permanently used, even as you unlock and equip a more powerful weapon with its own skill-set. If this sounds complicated it's because it is, but the system is explained clearly enough via in-game tutorials, so that it never feels overly cumbersome.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Atlus
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

The same can be said of the complex battle system. Combat is a tight, tactical affair where victory depends on using your heroes to the full. You're limited to a party of just three in battle, but unlike the majority of RPGs, party members can be swapped mid-fight. By juggling characters – so that your three active combatants in any given fight have the skills to exploit your enemy's weakness (fire beats ice, for example) – it's possible to trigger chains of attacks, called Sessions. Do this often enough and you'll fill your Special Performances bar, letting you summon your Fire Emblem protectors for even more devastating attacks.

Sadly *Tokyo Mirage Sessions* isn't quite as vibrant when it comes to its locales. Its sprawling levels are thematically based on the arts: theatre, photography and so on. But, in truth, they never truly shine. Instead, dungeons tend to be repetitive in the way bland, samey textures are used, and in how often levels puzzles recur. One early challenge has you moving from floor-to-floor by manipulating giant mannequins, for example, but the idea starts to wear thin at its fourth airing. The same could be said of the game's writing. Though the plot, which spans some 50 hours, is endearingly light-hearted and even funny, the character's relationships and struggles aren't particularly gripping – especially when compared to Atlus' brilliant Persona series. However, *Tokyo Mirage Sessions*' undeniably entertaining combat system steals the show, making it easy to overlook its shortcomings.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DRAMATIC TWIST: Everything from how the heroes are referred to as 'Artists', to how weapons and outfits are swapped in your 'Wardrobe' exudes theatre, propagating the droll, original style

VERDICT

A FINE CURTAIN RAISER AS WE AWAIT PERSONA 5

7 gamesTMmag scored 7 for Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FM

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

End-of-level bosses are always huge, are tough to beat and usually require a very tactical approach.

A BRAVE NEW WORLD

Elite: Dangerous

DETAILS

FORMAT: HTC Vive
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Frontier Developments
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: MMO
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7 or better, Quad Core CPU (4 x 2Ghz), Nvidia GTX 260 equivalent or higher, 4GB Ram
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

By now, you *know Elite: Dangerous*. You know how to charter a mission across the galaxy when you're half asleep and we have little doubt that you've become a feared space-pirate in your own right, but believe us when we say that you've never seen *Elite: Dangerous* look quite this spectacular before. *Elite: Dangerous* in virtual reality; the appeal is easy to understand. If you've ever dreamed of gazing out at the galaxy, of exploring new worlds, seeking out new life and civilisations; boldly going where no one has gone before; then this will be a dream come through. Thankfully, Frontier Developments has ensured that the execution is as good as the raw appeal of such a technological combination.

The VR augmentation gives you complete 360-degree peripheral vision inside the cockpit of your customisable starship,

bringing you even closer to a vehicle that you've gone to hell and back in time and time before. Simply moving your head to quickly check navigation charts, assess resources and track others ships in your near vicinity is a natural extension of the core gameplay – *Elite: Dangerous* feels like it was designed for VR.

While *Elite: Dangerous* doesn't make use of HTC Vive's many unique functions – such as the motion controls or the floor space – the quality of image is far superior to that of the one delivered by Oculus Rift. A common complaint with the title in VR has been its tendency to make many elements of the game look blurry, though we found everything – from behemoth space stations to stars stretching off into the distance – to be pretty crisp. It's an important development, because it means there's very little to distract from the scale, it doesn't take long before you begin to feel very, very small in an impossibly large space; it's intimidating, but ultimately exhilarating.

This is the same *Elite Dangerous* that you've experienced before, it has the same flaws; lonely flight times, tough as nails encounters and overwhelming freedom. But the arrival of VR has only amplified and enhanced its positives, from its insane scope to the beautiful creative and artistic direction; you've never experienced anything like this before.

VERDICT

BEAUTIFUL, TERRIFYING AND UTTERLY UNIQUE

8 gamesTMmag scored **8** for Elite: Dangerous
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

A NEW LEVEL OF ROLE-PLAYING

Vanishing Realms

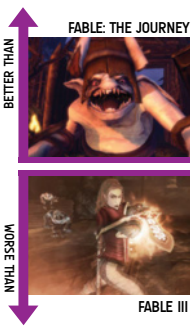
For immersion, VR should be the perfect format for experiencing an RPG, and in many ways *Vanishing Realms* proves that theory out. Being able to navigate this magical world with a sword and shield, hacking at enemies, collecting gems and surviving dangerous traps, all the time feeling as if you're placed in the middle of this world, vulnerable on all sides, is pretty special.

Vanishing Realms needs to walk a tight line between immersion and compromising for the limited space you have in the room around you. Moving around means warping from spot to spot and enemies that stand in place, waiting for you to enter their zone of attack. And for the most part, that's alright. It can get a little frustrating when you're attempting to avoid enemy arrows or want to run away from a particularly large enemy, but it's not game-breaking.

Plus, planting yourself in a spot behind cover and firing arrows or fireballs from a wand at reanimated warriors before ducking back and watching their volley sail past you

DETAILS

FORMAT: HTC Vive
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Indimo Labs
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7 or better, Intel Core i7, Nvidia GeForce GTX 970 equivalent or higher, 2 GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



The undead swordsmen are imposing foes to take on, striking with force. Learning their attack patterns and looking for openings to attack is what combat revolves around.

is a thrill. Combat is intense and enjoyable in *Vanishing Realms*. Melee sword-fighting is particularly gruelling as you parry and block attacks, waiting for your chance to strike.

Vanishing Realms lacks two important things though that would have made it really amazing. Firstly, it's a pretty short game really with no great depth to its puzzle-solving or upgrading of items. It's a light RPG, ultimately, which is elevated by its platform and extended somewhat by the gauntlet gameplay it offers post-adventure. And given its art style, we can't help but feel that Indimo Labs missed an opportunity to inject a little more humour and wit to the experience. *Vanishing Realms* takes itself a little more seriously than seems entirely necessary for such a fleeting adventure. It's a small touch that would have elevated the overall experience quite considerably. What's left is enjoyable, but a little soulless. Impressive, but short. Interesting, but not quite captivating. There's a great deal more that could be done, but this is a promising start.

VERDICT

A GOOD PROOF OF CONCEPT FOR VR RPGS

6 gamesTMmag scored **6** for Vanishing Realms
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

WE'VE NEVER ENJOYED WORK SO MUCH

Job Simulator

DETAILS

FORMAT: HTC Vive
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Owlchemy Labs
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £22.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7 SP1, Windows 8.1 or later, Windows 10, CPU: Intel i5-4590, AMD FX 8350 equivalent or better, 4 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 970, AMD Radeon R9 290 equivalent or better, 1 GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

***Job Simulator* is one of those games where you could argue for hours as to how to play it 'properly'.** Do you follow the objective and live out the simulation as it is being delivered to you, acting out the role of loyal employee as envisioned by robots in the future? Or do you photocopy doughnuts and throw plant pots at customers? The correct answer is both.

Owlchemy Labs' VR experience is spiritually in the realms of *Surgeon Simulator* and *Goat Simulator*, games that are really at their most fun when you don't do what you're "supposed" to do. It's a game that comes alive when you try to break it. Why would you actually play out the role of an office worker, albeit this skewed and weird manipulation of it through the eyes of robots in 2050 who seem to have only a tangential understanding of the role, when you could be throwing coffee at your coworkers? And when you do attempt to do something potentially game-breaking it's a thrill to find that the developer has prepared for that and delivers a little feedback to acknowledge your imagination.

It's ultimately a limited game, though, for all its good humour and the excellent accuracy of its integration with the HTC Vive. With only four jobs and a limited number of tasks to complete in each, the lifespan of the game won't be many hours and there's not necessarily a mass of replay value, which is a shame for a sandbox experience. Picking up and manipulating objects is intuitive though, and the game world is simple and colourful. It's another great indicator of the potential for VR gaming going forward and its lighthearted approach is very pleasing. If you're investing in the hardware then this is a game most will want to download and enjoy, but it certainly isn't a reason to get started in the VR world.

VERDICT

THESE ROBOTS HAVE HEART, BUT NOT DEPTH

6 gamesTMmag scored **6** for Job Simulator

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

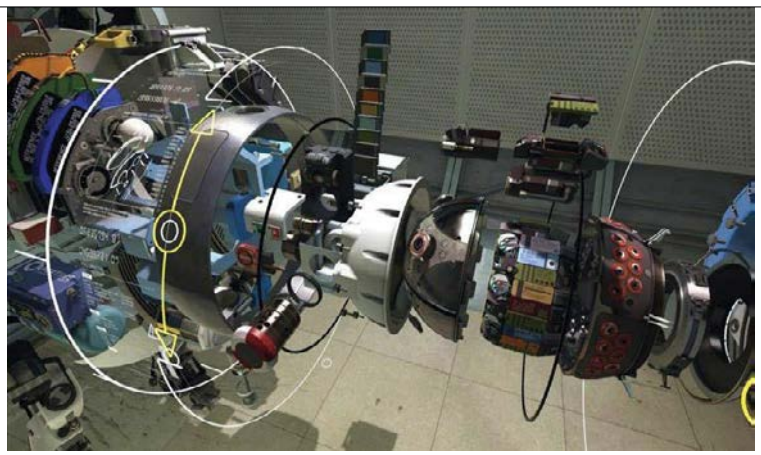
Above: The robot world doesn't work exactly like our world, but its strange interpretation of what humans did at work is a lot of fun to try and decipher. They have all sorts of fun technological shortcuts to play around with.

A GLORIOUS TEASE FOR PORTAL VR

The Lab

DETAILS

FORMAT: HTC Vive
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Valve
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7 or better, Intel® i5-4590, Nvidia GeForce GTX 970 equivalent or higher, 4GB Ram
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



It's best not to think of *The Lab* as a game, per se. Instead, look at it as a series of *Portal*-themed mini-games and vignettes; a window into what's going on behind the scenes at one of the most beloved (but secretive) studios in the world. Honestly, it's difficult to appreciate the majority of HTC Vive releases after metaphysically setting foot in Aperture Science's Enrichment Center for the first time. The scale of each room is immediately impressive, the flashes of ingenuity found throughout are peerless, and, of course, Valve's signature wit is a delight to experience again.

The Lab is best when it's working as a showcase to virtual reality. The Secret Shop – a life-size render of *DOTA2*'s item shop– is a smart demonstration of how plausible a first-person point and click adventure game would be. Set in an enclosed space, it simply lets you browse mystical wares and tinker with some magical effects. But it does it to great effect; never have we felt so close to actually being inside the tropic locales of *Monkey Island*.

There are also non-game applications for VR to be found. The ability to dissect a life-size human skeleton, and another that lets you gain a new perspective of the solar system, shows how important VR could be for enhancing education in the future. But the real show-stealer is Aperture Robot Repair, an interactive comedy sketch set in the *Portal* world that will make you desperate for more. Getting hands-on with new gadgets and some familiar robotic faces will bring a smile, while being a whisker away from GLaDOS is as terrifying as you might expect. *Portal* has a future in VR, whether it's whipping through wormholes or a simpler physics-based romp deeper into the labs remains to be seen. And that's The Lab, a free showcase that's over all too quickly. It demonstrates the power, promise and potential of virtual reality better than anything we've played with so far; it's also a tragically fleeting experience.

VERDICT

FUN THAT'S OVER WAY TOO FAST

7 gamesTMmag scored **7** for The Lab

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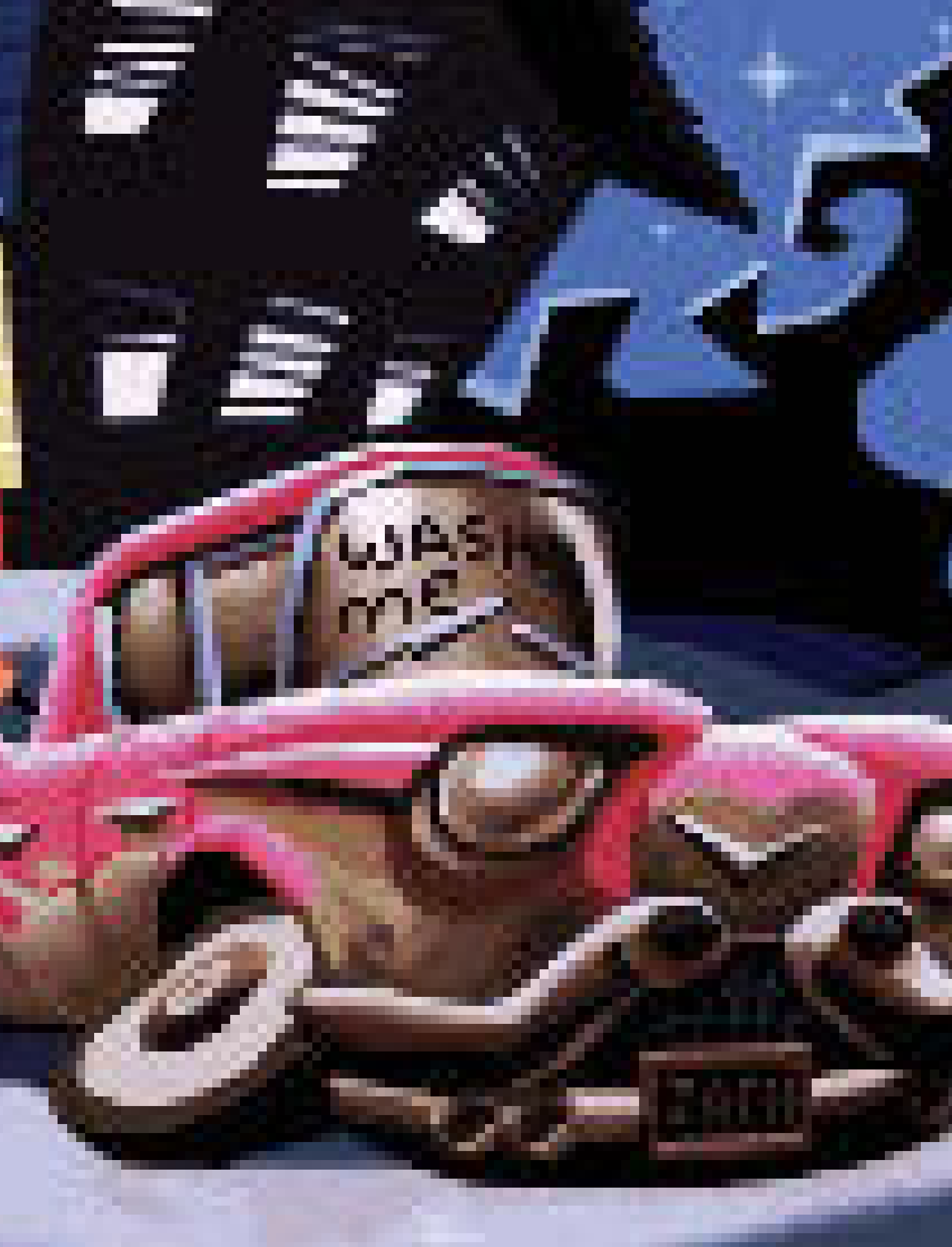
WHY I ♥...

MANIAC MANSION II: DAY OF THE TENTACLE

GRANT DUNCAN
ART DIRECTOR, HELLO GAMES

A game that I love? It would have to be Day Of The Tentacle! *I love the humour, and the way they played with time – the way you can go into the past and plant something and then come forward into the future and it's a tree, I really liked that. And equally – even though I was quite young when it first came out – I love the background art. Steve Purcell, one of the artists that worked on the game, he did a lot of the backgrounds on* Monkey Island *and* Sam & Max, *I'm basically a massive Steve Purcell fanboy. He was the guy that effectively made me think, 'maybe I could do something like that' and the first things that made me want to do art in games. It's a double whammy for me, not only is it an awesome game but it also – from an art point of view – was super cool.*

"I love the humour, and the way they played with time"
GRANT DUNCAN, ART DIRECTOR, HELLO GAMES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RETRO

NO.176

90
RETRO GUIDE TO...
ATARI LYNX

How many of these games on the first colour handheld did you get to play? We take a closer look at the best the Lynx had to offer

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96 GHOST-BUSTERS II
As the spectre-chasing team gets a big screen reboot we take a look at one of the attempts to adapt the movie to gaming systems

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The former drummer for The Police tells us how he got involved with *Spyro The Dragon* and what it was like moving from pop music to gaming scores

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It was the game that kickstarted the 3D sandbox revolution, but what exactly was it about DMA Design's criminal sim that helped to define a Rockstar game?

DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro on our dedicated forum www.gamestm.co.uk/forum

THE RETRO GUIDE TO...

ATARI® LYNX

It was the world's first colour handheld, but only lasted for six short years. **games**™ celebrates the best games for Atari's powerful console

THERE'S A GREAT story from Dave Needle where he recalls visiting Nintendo with his boss to pitch the Lynx, then known as the Handy. After listening to an aggressive pitch, Hiroshi Yamauchi summoned a trolley to be wheeled in which contained two linked Game Boys set up to play *Tetris*. The owners of the Lynx went home empty handed and eventually sold their machine to Atari.

Despite being an incredibly powerful piece of kit for its time, the Lynx could not compete with the sheer popularity of Nintendo's Game Boy and while it was host to some truly stunning arcade conversions, it failed to significantly expand its games library due to a distinct lack of third-party support. Worry not though, as that small library helps make the Lynx very desirable to collect for. Don't believe us? Check the following gems out.

BLUE LIGHTNING 1989

EPYX

Blue Lightning was an excellent launch game for Atari's handheld. It boasted truly phenomenal visuals that were streets ahead of the Game Boy and even gave some home systems a run for their money. Dubbed at the time as "*After Burner* in the palm of your hand", it was a similar shooter to Sega's iconic blaster and even ripped off the canyon stage wholesale. It added plenty of its own ideas, however, in the form of varied missions that ensured there was always more to do than just mindless blasting. Even today, it plays extremely well, although it's actually a little more sedate than you may remember.

CALIFORNIA GAMES 1989

EPYX

Yes, we could get uppity about the fact that *Roller Skating* and *Flying Disc* weren't included, but who cares when the rest of the game is so polished. Originally released as a pack-in for the Lynx, *California Games* features four excellent sports events: Surfing, Footbag, BMX and Half-Pipe. The presentation throughout is fantastic, while the visuals are gorgeous, particularly for the surfing and the half-pipe stages, which make great use of the Lynx's scaling capabilities. The controls on all four events are tight and responsive, and events like Footbag and Surfing allow you to rack up some pretty big scores. It's also one of the first Lynx games to use the Comlynx, allowing for up to four players to play at once.

CHIP'S CHALLENGE 1989

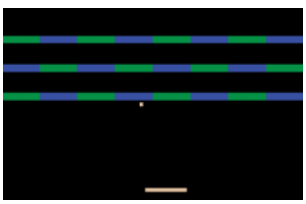
EPYX

This excellent puzzle game was such a success it was ported to a whole range of other systems. It's basically a bunch of tile-based puzzles that become ever more complex as Chip progresses. New puzzles are slowly introduced, meaning the gameplay always keeps you interested with inventive new ways of clearing each stage of its required chips.

ELECTROCOP 1989

EPYX

Another great launch title and another game that highlights the graphical prowess of the Lynx. Playing as *ElectroCop* you must negotiate a seemingly impregnable fortress, hacking doors and finding the weapons that will let you destroy the fortress's many dangerous robots. It's notable for some excellent scaling effects that kick in as you run into and out of new rooms.



SHANGHAI 1990

MEDIAGENIC

This Lynx adaptation of the classic tile-matching game proved to be a great time-waster. The aim of the game is to simply remove all the tiles in play from the multi-tiered configurations. You can only remove the outermost tiles however, so you must ensure you don't trap tiles and lose the game. Simple, but addictive.

KLAX 1990

ATARI CORPORATION

Klax was a stunning adaptation of the hit arcade game. The idea is to catch tiles as they fall down a conveyor belt, and then dump them into a bucket. Creating a line of three or more creates a Klax, which removes tiles (it's game over if your bucket fills or you miss a set amount of tiles. It's notable for its superb speech and the fact you hold the Lynx vertically to play.

RAMPAGE 1990

ATARI CORPORATION

Rampage was another great coin-op conversion. The original arcade game saw players take on the roles of giant monsters and smash down buildings in order to move to the next stage. The Lynx version replicates the carnage perfectly, but goes one better than the arcade game by introducing a brand new character in the form of giant rat man Larry and letting four players play at once. It's solid fun but does get a little repetitive.

"THE LYNX VERSION CAPTURES ALL THE CARNAGE OF THE ORIGINAL GAME AND RUNS AT AN ASTONISHINGLY QUICK PACE"

ROADBLASTERS 1990

ATARI CORPORATION

You've guessed it, *Roadblasters* is another arcade port. This one is incredible, and arguably one of the best examples on the system. Set in a post-apocalyptic world you must race through levels mowing down whatever vehicles are foolish enough to get in your way. The Lynx version captures all the carnage of the original game and runs at an astonishingly quick pace. It doesn't boast much in the way of longevity, but it's perfect if you just want a quick blasting experience.

TODD'S ADVENTURES IN SLIME WORLD 1990

EPYX

This was one of the Lynx's high-tier original games and Atari really pushed the boat out with it. First off it featured excellent looking visuals with oozy looking locations that seemed to throb and pulse with life. Essentially you're on a mission to retrieve valuable slime gems, meaning you're walking around large maze-like caverns, looking for items and fending off monsters. Getting hit by enemies covered you in slime, which could be removed by finding pools of water. While there are only seven levels, they are huge in size and vary massively from each other, essentially working as different game modes. It was big on co-operative play too, supporting an impressive eight players via Comlynx.

XENOPHOBE 1990

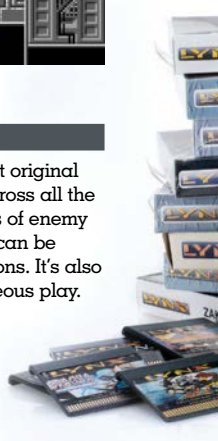
ATARI CORPORATION

This conversion of the quirky coin-op is quite impressive as it actually improves on the original's convoluted control system – it caters for four-players, too. Gameplay is fairly straightforward, consisting of making your way through an infested space station and clearing out all the xenomorphic inhabitants. It's simple, but a lot of fun, particularly when played with friends. The Lynx version also features additional items, such as jetpacks, and even a mode where you can play as an alien and hunt your friends down.

ZARLOR MERCENARY 1990

EPYX

Created by Chuck Sommerville, this is arguably the Lynx's best original shooter. The levels are fairly nondescript, with your ship flying across all the usual environments, but the action is fast and relentless, with lots of enemy waves to deal with. Destroying enemies gives you money, which can be spent at the end of each stage to buy suitably over-the-top weapons. It's also one of the earliest shoot-em-ups to cater for four player simultaneous play.



DRACULA THE UNDEAD 1991

HANDMADE SOFTWARE

It's a pity more graphic adventure games didn't appear on the Lynx, as *Dracula* is a cracking example of how the genre might have fared. Loosely based on the original novel (Bram Stoker narrates the story) you play as Jonathan Harker and must escape Dracula's castle. Graphically, it's extremely smart with some lovely sepia tones that make it look like an old painting that's come to life. It also boasts some clever puzzles and rarely leaves you stranded like similar examples of the genre. If we have one niggle it's that it's a little too short, but is great fun while it lasts.

CHECKERED FLAG 1991

ATARI CORPORATION

Imagine a more exciting version of *Pole Position* with better visuals and you're basically imagining Atari's handheld racer. The tracks are well designed and quite testing, there are also a lot of them – 18, in fact. It's an impressive number, but equally impressive is the sheer amount of options available to you upon starting. You can choose whether to practice, race a single lap or compete in a tournament, decide how many opponents you want to race against (up to nine) choose your transmission and even choose your gender, which was quite a rarity for the time. The races are admittedly tough, but never unfair, and up to six players can take part. The system's best racer.

THE MAN WITH EVERY LYNX GAME

Kieren Hawken on his collection

How long did it take to amass a complete collection?

Fairly quickly actually as I already had loads of the games from when I was younger including some of the harder to find stuff like *Lemmings* and *Double Dragon*. I also started collecting before Lynx stuff really started rising in value, I seem to remember I did it in just a few months.

What is it you like about the Atari Lynx?

I first fell in love with the Lynx when my best friend brought one back from a holiday to the USA in 1989. I started saving up my paper round money and bought one of my own in 1990. Games like *ElectroCop* and *Blue Lightning* just blew me away, there wasn't any other system that could do games like that at the time, let alone a handheld. It never stopped impressing either, I still remember my jaw dropping in amazement at the speech in *Klax* and the 3D effects of *STUN Runner*.

What advice would you give to those starting their own collection?

Look around and don't just rely on eBay where prices are often inflated. There are a lot of online stores around that sell Lynx stuff and places like Telegames and Songbird still stock some of the rarer items too.

What do you think the Lynx offers over other handhelds of the time?

For a start it was technically superior, it blew away both the Game Boy and the Game Gear. As far as games go, what it lacks in quantity it makes up for in quality, there really are very few bad games in the Lynx library. It also still gets new releases through the homebrew community, which you don't see from its rivals.

What's the best game in your collection and why?

In terms of my favourite game it has to be *Robotron 2084*, a great conversion of the classic arcade game which is just perfect in small blasts. My favourite item in my collection however is my extremely rare Japanese version of *Klax*, the only Japanese Lynx game to differ from the western release.

AWESOME GOLF 1991

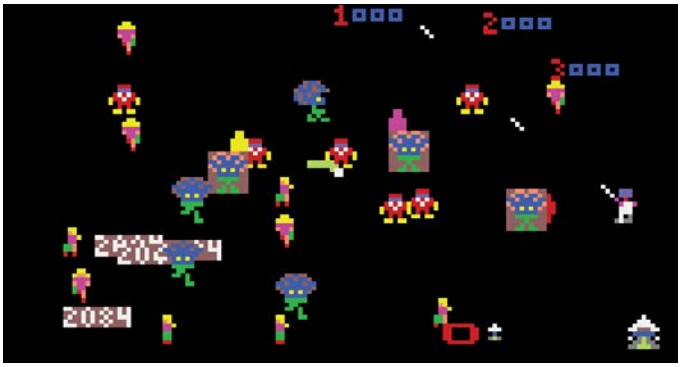
HANDMADE GAMES

There's only one golf game on Lynx, but it's a cracker. The three-part swing system does take a while to get to grips with, but once mastered, you'll be hitting like a pro. Your golfer's animation is lovely, there are three exceedingly tricky courses to master and a huge number of options to tweak. It caters for up to four players, too.

ROBOTRON: 2084 1991

SHADOWSOFT

Robotron is one of the finest twitch shooters of all time and its twin-stick control system is still being used in games today. You'd expect a Lynx port to be absolutely rubbish, but you'd be very wrong. Like the arcade original, *Robotron* throws a large number of sprites around, but it doesn't tax the Lynx at all. The controls have obviously been compromised, but still work a treat. You fire automatically, with your two fire buttons rotating your character's fire left and right. It's elegant and works surprisingly well, allowing you to blast your way through level after level of carnage.



"ROBOTRON IS ONE OF THE FINEST TWITCH SHOOTERS OF ALL TIME AND ITS TWIN-STICK CONTROL SYSTEM IS STILL BEING USED IN GAMES TODAY"

SUPER SKWEEK 1991

LORICIEL

This excellent hybrid is part puzzler, part arcade game and definitely needs a permanent place in your collection. Essentially you're just walking over blue tiles to turn them pink, which is admittedly pretty easy. As the levels progress, however, all sorts of new tile types appear that include crumbling tiles, conveyor tiles and much more. Like *Chip's Challenge*, new mechanics are introduced slowly, but eventually combine together to create increasingly tricky problems that must all be solved against some tight time limits. In addition to the core game, which contains 250 levels, you can play levels randomly or even compete against another player.

S.T.U.N. RUNNER 1991

ATARI CORPORATION

Roadblasters, *Toki* and *S.T.U.N. Runner* are considered to be some of the Lynx's best arcade ports – Their connection? D. Scott Williamson. The talented coder really knew how to get the best out of the Lynx and his port of *S.T.U.N. Runner* was no exception. Obviously the Lynx was never going to match the polygon visuals featured in the arcade game, but Williamson's port retained everything else, including its brilliant speech and insane sense of speed. *S.T.U.N. Runner*'s excellence lies in its simplicity; it's essentially a case of racing through winding tunnels as quickly as possible, grabbing stars as you go and shooting down enemies while avoiding the ones that are bulletproof. It's basic, but a lot of fun, with a fair number of courses to master. Before *Midway Arcade Treasures 3* appeared, it was the best home version of the game you could buy, outperforming the Amiga and Atari ST versions.

NINJA GAIDEN 1991

ATARI CORPORATION

This Lynx conversion is notable for being the only console port of the popular Tecmo coin-op. Sadly, it's missing the two-player option that made the arcade version so fun, but this is an otherwise solid port of the arcade scrolling fighter, delivering plenty of hard hitting combat along with some tough bosses and varied enemies. Interestingly, although *Ninja Gaiden 3* also appeared on the Lynx, the second game didn't make it.

WARBIRDS 1991

ATARI CORPORATION

This fun combat game is effectively the Lynx's answer to Cinemaware's classic *Wings*. The presentation isn't the best, but the aerial combat is extremely fun, channelling the spirit of Atari's old coin-op *Red Baron*, but adding far more sophisticated enemy AI that ensures plenty of challenge. Graphically it's all rather impressive, once again highlighting how good Atari's hardware was in the right hands.

RAMPART 1992

ATARI CORPORATION

This is another classy conversion of a popular coin-op. *Rampart* is split into three distinct sections. Initially you must build castle walls out of tetromino blocks; you must then fill your fortress with gun emplacements and use them to withstand an enemy attack, repairing any damage to your walls in the next round (it's game over if your castle isn't completed). Although the Lynx version only caters for two players, it does feature neat cutscenes that weren't in the original game.

TOKI 1992

ATARI CORPORATION

This arcade conversion is another Lynx highlight that every Lynx fan should consider owning. The gameplay is standard run-and-gun fare, with your ape traversing platforms and shooting down waves of enemies on his quest to rescue his girlfriend. Graphically, *Toki* is excellent, capturing all the humour and vibrancy of the original coin-op. It's certainly tough at times, but never unfairly so and does a great job of replicating the large bosses found in the original game.

BATTLEWHEELS 1993

BEYOND GAMES

The visuals of *Battlewheels* are fantastic and highlight just how powerful the Lynx could be. The gameplay is of an equally high standard although it's worth noting that *Battlewheels* was originally designed for competitive play (up to six players could compete in the arena battles). Fortunately, the addition of bots and some decent AI ensures that *Battlewheels* is more than playable in single player mode and the large number of different maps and options ensure that skirmishes never get boring. You can even get out of your car and run around (although you won't last very long if you do).

DESERT STRIKE 1993

TELEGAMES

There are obviously compromises on this port, but it's still a highly impressive adaptation of the popular Mega Drive game. It's easily the best handheld offering available, thanks to its great looking visuals and the large number of missions that have been included. Due to being a late release (it's one of a number of titles picked up by Telegames) it's now rapidly climbing in price.

LEMMINGS 1993

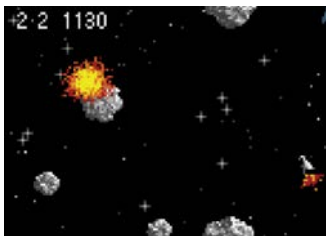
ATARI CORPORATION

Lemmings is an incredible port, replicating virtually every aspect of the original game. The tiny graphics are brilliantly animated, and amazingly, it features all 120 levels too. It is slightly hampered by a lack of buttons, but you quickly adapt, allowing you to save all those suicidal rodents. It's lacking the original multiplayer mode, but it's a small price to pay for such a fantastically accurate port. Be warned though, it's another game that's climbing in price.

BATTLEZONE 2000 1995

HANDMADE GAMES

This is so much more than a port of the aging coin-op. Planned as part of a Lynx re-launch, which sadly never happened, *Battlezone 2000*, featured new power-ups, a variety of different tanks and the ability to play with other players. Amazingly, though, it also had a hidden game that featured 2000 missions and excellent visuals. Atari felt it would be too intimidating to gamers, so foolishly locked it away.



SUPER ASTEROIDS AND MISSILE COMMAND 1995

ATARI CORPORATION

One of the last official Lynx games was a brave update of two classic Atari games. *Asteroids* is the better of the two games due to its more natural control system (the original *Missile Command* was heavily reliant on a trackball) but both titles are very solid ports. Like many later Lynx games it's now rapidly rising in price.

MORE ATARI LYNX GAMES

- GAUNTLET: THE THIRD ENCOUNTER (1989) EPYX
- MS. PAC-MAN (1990) ATARI CORPORATION
- ROBO-SQUASH (1990) ATARI CORPORATION
- RYGAR (1990) ATARI CORPORATION
- A.P.B. (1991) QUICKSILVER SOFTWARE
- FIDELITY ULTIMATE CHESS CHALLENGE (1991) TELEGAMES
- ISHIDO: THE WAY OF THE STONES (1991) CALIFORNIA DREAMS
- QIX (1991) KNIGHT TECHNOLOGIES
- VIKING CHILD (1991) IMAGITEC DESIGN
- STEEL TALONS (1992) NUFX
- CRYSTAL MINES II (1992) COLOR DREAMS
- DINOLYMPICS (1992) IMAGITEC DESIGN
- JOUST (1992) SHADOWSOFT
- POWER FACTOR (1992) HANDMADE SOFTWARE

BEHIND THE SCENES

GHOSTBUSTERS II

As the Ghostbusters franchise is given a 21st Century reboot, we aim our proton pack energy streams towards the game that looked to tie-in with the 1989 sequel

Released: 1989
Format: Amiga, Amstrad CPC, Atari ST, Commodore 64, ZX Spectrum
Publisher: Activision
Key Staff: Stefan Ufnowska (director), Anna Ufnowska (writer), Colin Reed (programmer), Steven Green (artist), Philip Oliver (8-bit conversion), Andrew Oliver (8-bit conversion)

■ Philip Oliver has been having a rummage around his loft, managing to find the original media on which *Ghostbusters II* was partly developed.

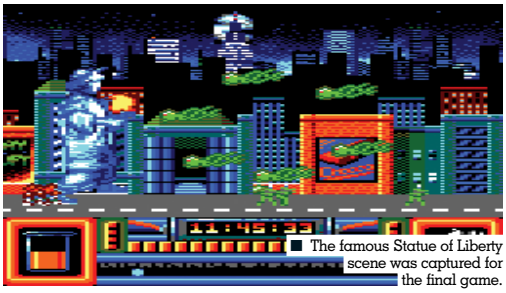
***GHOSTBUSTERS II* ON THE 8-BIT AND 16-BIT HOME COMPUTERS HAD A PROBLEM: IT HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THE FILM.** It began to receive mixed reviews; almost an inevitable situation, given the high quality and popularity of the original supernatural comedy and the limits of video games in the late Eighties. It didn't have anything to do with the quality of the game's graphics, either, for they were largely excellent. Nor was it the audio: there was an excellent rendition of the Ghostbusters tune. The game even included digitised stills from the movie. But there was a problem nonetheless.

In issue 28 of *ACE* magazine, published by EMAP, reviewer Brian Nesbitt took issue with the game's three, relatively short levels on the home computer versions. Although they were rather varied, not to mention difficult – which meant gamers would end up playing each one for a while before cracking them – the magazine clearly wanted more bang for its buck and it was, as you'd expect, unafraid to state its feelings.

The reviewer said the game "fails to succeed both as a film conversion and as a game in its own right". He added: "Interestingly enough, the film was originally going to be called *The Last Of The Ghostbusters*. After this, I hope it is." Further damning *Ghostbusters II* as a turkey and slamming it for having arrived on three disks (four on the Atari ST), the magazine awarded the game a paltry 251 out of 1,000. It caused a storm which blew all over the trade press at the time and proved to be hugely embarrassing for a gaming franchise that had debuted so well five years earlier.

The real issue is that there were actually three versions of *Ghostbusters II*: a difficult, single-player side-scroller for the NES that had been created by Imagineering; a cool action release created in three months by Dynamix for DOS and a home computer version developed by Foursfield that saw a release on the Amiga, Atari ST, Commodore 64, Amstrad CPC and ZX Spectrum. It was this latter version that *ACE* had cast its eyes over, most notably for the 16-bit computers. In all cases, the games were published by Activision, who had secured the movie licence from Columbia Pictures. "The licence was acquired by Activision as part of an arcade deal – it might even have been the US side," says Charles Cecil, Activision's development manager at the time.

■ The developers wanted to capitalise on the familiarity of the film's characters and make it clear the game was very much based upon the movie.



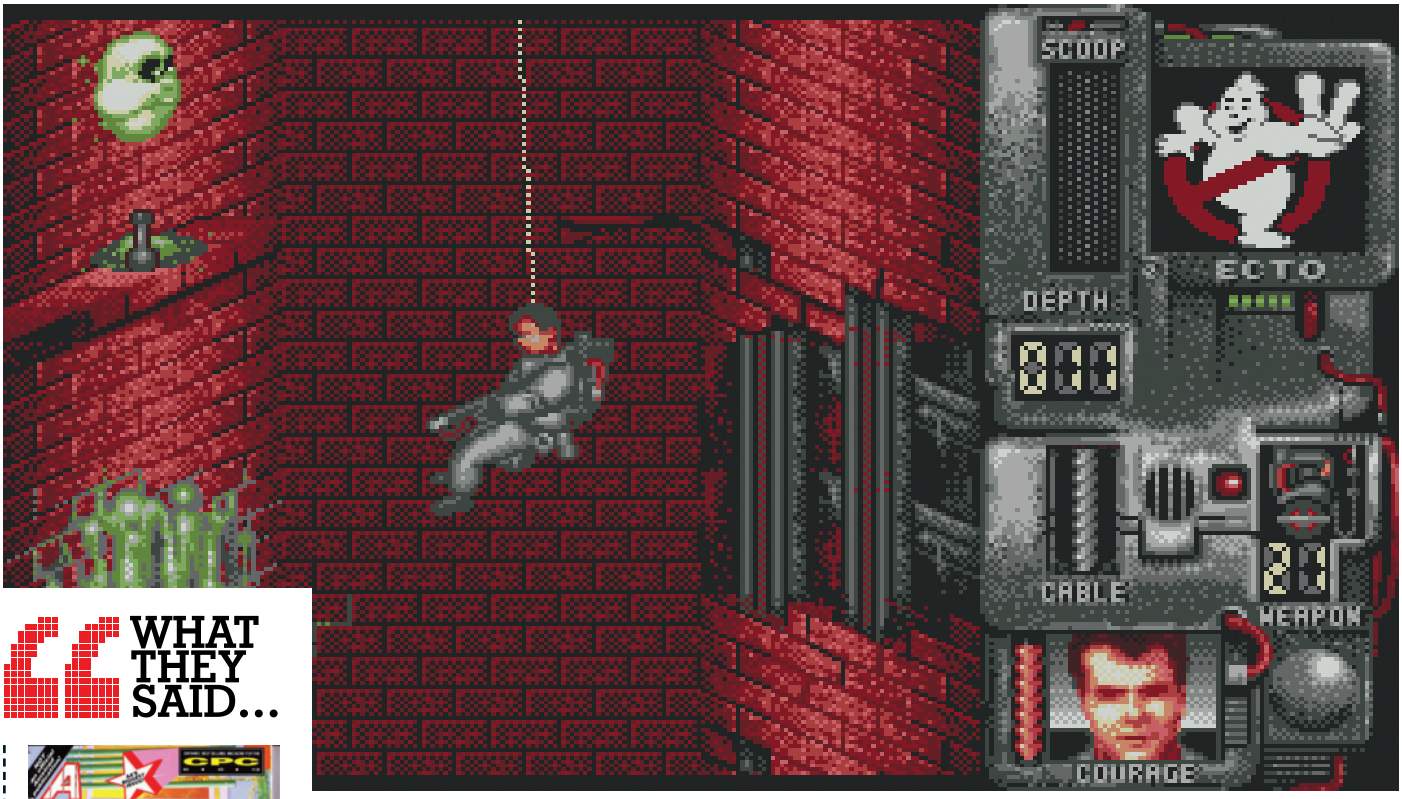
■ The famous Statue of Liberty scene was captured for the final game.

SADLY IN THE MOVIE THIS SCENE WAS SHORT AND THEY REMOVED ANY GHOSTLY APPARITIONS

■■■ The idea was for the film to be released in the summer of 1989 and for the game to follow shortly afterwards in the expectation that it would become a great autumn and holiday season seller. The previous *Ghostbusters* game, from 1984, had sold more than two million copies and had become the best-selling game of all time – a title it still held five years later. There was a great weight of expectation for the sequel and there had been hope among players that David Crane, who created the first game, would be on board for the sequel.

It wasn't to be, but Activision was confident that Foursfield, a relatively small developer based in Warminster near Trowbridge, would be able to pull it off. The developer consisted of a husband and wife team, Anna and Stefan Ufnowska, talented programmer Colin Reed, and accomplished artist, Steven Green, each of who had worked on the acclaimed isometric maze game *Incredible Shrinking Sphere*, a title that Philip and Andrew Oliver – aka The Oliver Twins – had converted to the 8-bits.

"Activision had worked with Stefan on a number of projects and the most memorable, for me, was The Incredible Shrinking Sphere," says Cecil. Similar to Marble Madness and Spindizzy, the game involved guiding a ball through levels, collecting weapons and making use of various squares. The Amiga version had achieved 923 out of 1,000 in ACE and it had scored more than 80 for other systems (the poor CPC version excepted). There was no doubting Foursfield's



WHAT THEY SAID...

"At last the Ghostbusters have come of age and star in a game worthy of their name. Humour pervades but not at the expense of action."

Amstrad Action, 1990

credentials. But in developing *Ghostbusters II* for the Amiga, Atari ST and Commodore 64, the team not only had just six months in which to complete the game, it also had to work "blind".

Starting in February 1989, Anna Ufnowska said the team had little else to go on except the movie script – an unavoidable situation, as the film was still in production when work on the game began. It meant none of the title's programmers, designers or artists had the benefit of seeing the film, forcing the Ufnowskas to look for scenes which they felt would work well and concentrate on those.

As such, the first decision had to be how many of those scenes it would be able to include and how best to visualise them. Initially, consideration had been given to creating four levels for the game and, indeed, some previews in the gaming press suggested there would be four arcade-style scenarios, each of which would stress the comedy inherent in the movie. But instead it was decided the game would revolve around just three, unique levels, each one based on what was felt would be the main beats of the movie.

"Taking just two scenes from the movie, and producing just two small games would not have been enough, but four or more would have been prohibitively expensive and there simply wasn't the time available either," says Philip Oliver who, along with brother Andrew, had been quickly brought on board to continue their relationship with Foursfield, working on the Spectrum and Amstrad CPC versions.

The twins had needed no persuading to get involved in the project. "Stefan Ufnowska asked us if we'd like to convert *Ghostbusters II* and we jumped at the chance," says Oliver. It was a busy period for the pair, who would end up juggling the programming of *Ghostbusters II* with coding *Jet Ski Simulator*, *Operation Gunship* and *Fantasy World Dizzy*, each for the CPC and Spectrum. But to speed up production, they would convert *Ghostbusters II* from the CPC to the Spectrum as they went along.

IN THE EIGHTIES, IF A GAME WAS EASY, THAT SUGGESTED IN SOME WAY THAT IT WAS INFERIOR

The Olivers' workload during this period entailed seven months of 18 to 20-hour days, seven-days-a week but the brothers had bags of energy (and, they admit, no social life at this time). Aged just 21, the twins had already mustered up a sizeable gameography and even

■ Each of the levels were akin to separate games, which led to criticism that they didn't hang together well enough but each was very playable, if a little short.

It's a non-so-helping hand reaching out to grab our hapless hero as he descends a spooky air shaft in New York.

spawned a much-loved character in Dizzy. But they were no strangers to ghostly goings on. "We were massive fans of *Ghostbusters* and it had inspired us to write another game, *Ghost Hunters*, a couple of years before," says Oliver. The pair worked from a four-bedroom house they had bought six months earlier in Trowbridge. They would drive the 15 minutes to Bratton, in the shadow of the Westbury White Horse, every few weeks to meet up with Foursfield where the team would comment on their progress, pass over assets and work on moving the game towards completion.

The Ufnoswkas decided the first level should be based upon a short scene in the film in which Dr Raymond Stantz is lowered down a manhole on the streets of New York in order to investigate some paranormal activity. While there, Stantz discovers a thick, oozing River of Slime and collects a sample, almost getting pulled under by gloopy ghosts in the process. For the developers, this movie scene appeared to be perfect gaming material and so it was translated into the player having to guide Stantz down past an assortment of unrelenting ghouls and ghosts. The aim was the same as the movie – to collect slime – but it would be possible to fire at the ghosts to shoo them away. "Sadly, in the movie this scene was short and they removed any ghostly apparitions," says Oliver. Yet it still made for an intriguing, fun opener.

To make it more challenging, the ghosts were able to scratch away at the rope supporting Dr Stantz in order to weaken it. There were also protruding obstacles, which would force the player to swing the ghostbuster away, usually into the path of a ghoul. It was certainly a tricky and original start to the game, given there was so much to consider, from collecting glasses and slime to amassing weapons and firing at the ghouls. Even when you reached the bottom of the air shaft, there was no let up; it was a case of heading straight back to the top to face a second onslaught. Even though the player could make use of a protective shield, it wasn't especially easy. Not only was the only hand-holding on offer some spooky hands reaching out to scare you half to death, you only had three lives.

"But the design was logical," Oliver says. "Descend the shaft, collect the slime, and then escape. To add gameplay we needed to put threats along the route." As for the difficulty, Oliver offers no apologies. "If a game was easy, in the Eighties, that suggested in some way that it was inferior," says Oliver. "Reviewers were expert game players and they dictated the opinion towards games through their reviews. If they found them too easy they often slammed them. That encouraged most game developers to target core players rather than casual."

One of the pleasant twists to this level was having an image of Stantz becoming increasingly terrified depending on what was happening to him within the game. As his courage visually ebbed away, it was up to the player to give him a boost or risk losing a life. It was a flourish replicated later with the other ghostbusters. "Dan Aykroyd, Bill Murray and Harold Ramis were massive Hollywood stars and it was important to see their faces," says Oliver. "We also did the 'team screen' which showed all their faces as large as possible."

Not that the frightened faces were especially difficult to create, for the Oliver Twins at least. "It was just another set of sprites," Oliver says. "We didn't think to hard or long about it. We had the 16-bit ST and Amiga versions of all the graphics created by Steve and we simply redrew each in Panda Sprites. It probably took us less than an hour." What did take longer, though, was working out ways to push ageing 8-bit technology. There was no doubt that the 16-bit

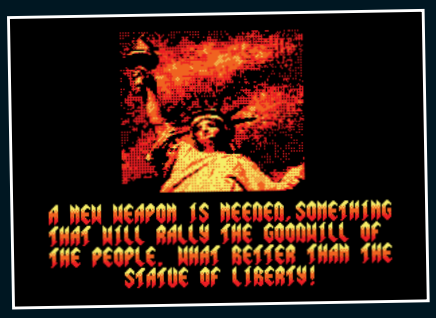
TELLING TALES

With three distinct levels, a way of creating a narrative was crucial

Foursfield had not seen *Ghostbusters II* when it began working on the game but it earmarked three scenes that it felt would work well. To help contextualise these levels for the players, Columbia Pictures agreed to provide a set of stills from the movie which were then captioned to set up each scenario.

LEVEL 1

Immediately, the game highlights that the action is taking place five years after the first movie. It explains that a buggy containing Dana's baby, Oscar, was almost crushed after being pushed into the road by a ghost, prompting Spengler and Stantz to investigate. After setting up some fake roadworks, it set the scene for Stantz to be lowered down an airshaft.

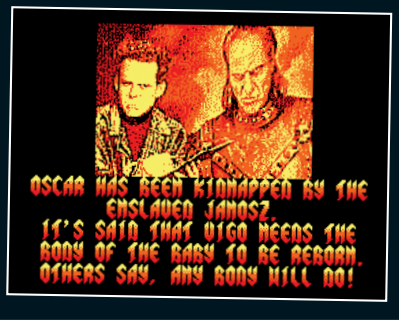


LEVEL 2

Having spotted the River of Slime, the next set of stills explain that it flows towards the museum. The 16th century tyrant and sorcerer Vigo the Carpathian is building power from people's evil thoughts and the ghostbusters need a way in. Cue the use of positively charged psychomagnotheric slime to bring the Statue of Liberty to life.

LEVEL 3

The final level was a little short on explanation – only one digitised image was used to set it up. Still, it said all it needed to, telling gamers that baby Oscar had been kidnapped by the enslaved head of the museum's Restoration department and that Vigo may need the child's body to be reborn. Succeed and Oscar survives.



■ The development team hang out outside their base at Shrewton Close as the game nears launch.

platforms offered some stark advantages over the CPC and Spectrum. This could be felt in the first level, certainly by Oliver, who says the Atari ST and Amiga were able to easily and smoothly scroll the screen, whereas the pixel-mapped screens of the 8-bits seemed more lethargic and so proved trickier to play. The difficulty in replicated the 16-bit experience showed how demanding the game actually was for the less powerful computers. Yet there was no faulting the ambition of what Foursfield was trying to achieve as it produced a game which it hoped would appeal to a full-price gaming market.

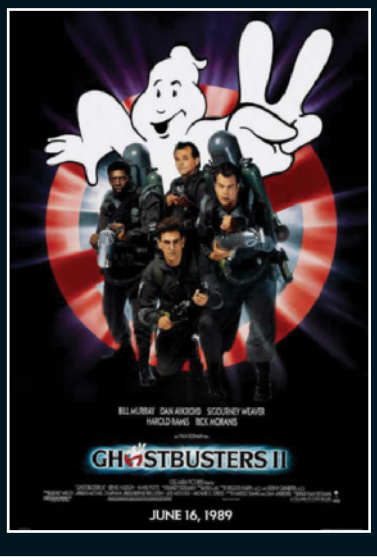
One of the accusations levelled at *Ghostbusters II* was that the levels were too dissimilar to each other and that the overall experience felt disjointed as a result. But this served to add variety, effectively giving three games in one, and the criticism actually glossed over the fact that the game was connected by a common theme: lots of green, gooey slime. This became a running enemy mechanic throughout the game and it lent the title a greater sense of coherence.

The second section involved marching the Statue of Liberty towards the Metropolitan Museum of Art, while aiming multi-directional fireballs at ghosts hellbent on stopping the robed figure in her tracks. The key component to this section was having the city's population scurrying after the slime left behind when a ghost was blasted, in order to replenish the statue's supplies.

"Since *Ghostbusters II*'s plot revolved around the energy contained in slime, it was this substance that the ghostbusters used to animate the Statue of Liberty," continues Oliver. "So this theme ran throughout the game as much as it did the film". Bringing the Statue of Liberty to life and walking it through New York was a key scene in the movie. "It made sense to turn this into a game," Oliver says. "The gameplay itself was based on classic, tried and tested horizontal-scrolling shooters, particularly the extremely popular *R-Type*."

STUDIO INTERFERENCE

If there's something weird and it don't look good...



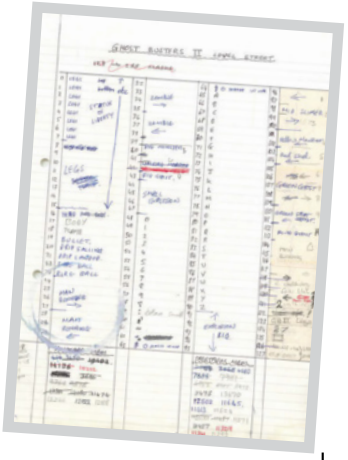
In general, Columbia Pictures did not get too involved in the development of the game, leaving it to the various games companies to interpret the movie in their own way. Activision would keep an eye on progress but there was a confidence at the publisher that the developers would pour their efforts into what was such a prestigious job.

The only real problem the studio caused for the team (aside from not having the movie ready before production of the game began) was indecision over the logo. "During production the film company couldn't decide on the final logo and we kept receiving different instructions on which to use," Philip Oliver recalls. "Was it the logo with or without that back foot?"

THERE HAD BEEN HOPE AMONG PLAYERS THAT DAVID CRANE WOULD BE ON BOARD FOR THE SEQUEL

In order to explain what was going on at each stage, movie stills and a small amount of text would aid the narrative and provide a second linking point. Columbia had handed the original images to Activision and Green converted them for use in the game. Green was also responsible for all of the 16-bit graphics which the Olivers converted to the Amstrad and Spectrum. How they translated to each platform was inevitably down to the capabilities of the computers, their resolutions and colour palettes.

On this score, reviewers and players, were unanimous in their appreciation. The graphics pushed the expectations of the Amstrad CPC in particular. Reviewers also enjoyed the audio, which had been professionally produced by David Whittaker. The result was actually, in hindsight, a game that was deeper than



> A GAMING EVOLUTION

Ghostbusters II > Batman: The Movie > Die Hard Trilogy

Ghostbusters II drew on different genres for its levels, like *Batman: The Movie* in 1989: driving, puzzles and platforming.

Die Hard Trilogy was a third-person shooter, an on-rails shooter and a driving game, another three games in one.

WHAT THEY SAID...

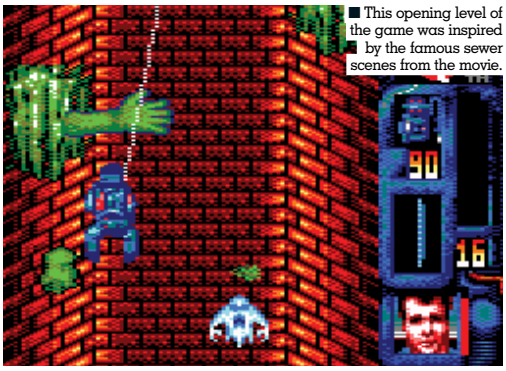
"Stilted, repetitive gameplay and the world's most ridiculous multiload conspire to totally scupper an exceptionally faithful and pretty film conversion.
Your Sinclair, 1990

many an Eighties movie tie-in, a lot of which would take several key scenes and turn them into relatively shallow games spread over many levels ("Depth was hard to achieve in movie games," says Oliver. "Developers would be tied to the film and that made the challenge of deeper gameplay hard to achieve"). This could be seen in the final section: an isometric 3D level which asked the player to control each of the four main characters as they faced various showdowns within the city museum.

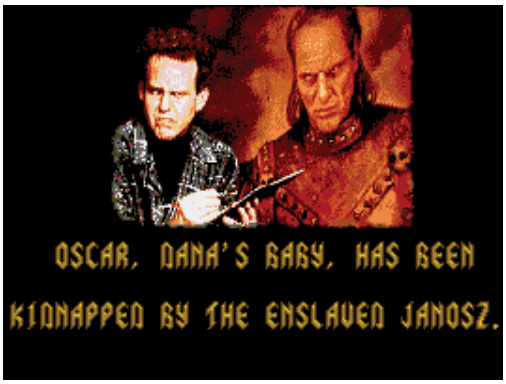
"The final battle of the film takes place in the museum as Dr Janosz Poha attempts to release the spirit of Vigo the Carpathian, a powerful 17th-century tyrant and magician trapped in a painting in the gallery," Oliver explains of the decision to use this as the basis of the level. "Vigo orders Janosz to locate a child that Vigo can possess, allowing him to return to life on the New Year. Being the film's final climax, it had to be the game's final level. Foursfield had chosen to design this as a series of 3D isometric rooms that players had to run around in order to defeat Janosz, Vigo and protect the baby. This was a good idea but technically pretty tricky, especially on 8-bit computers." Again, slime played its part to great effect.

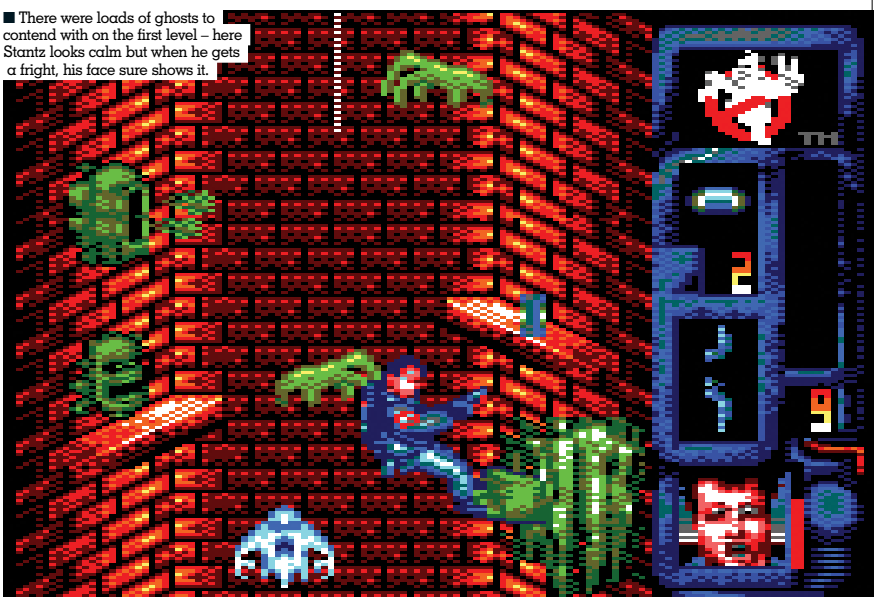
As the project neared its very end, the developers finally got to see the film. Having viewed the script and seen the stills, they had a solid idea of how it was going to work in principle but seeing it on the big screen was a chance to put the two works side-by-side. They had been invited to the media showing at Leicester Square in London. "It was a private viewing and we were sitting alongside film reviewers including Barry Norman, who was reviewing for *Film 89*," recalls Oliver. "By this point the game was pretty much finished, though."

As such, the game was wrapped up and readied for release (albeit it around a month late which Oliver says was because the 16-bit assets hadn't been delivered on time, which had a knock-on effect on the 8-bit versions). Buoyed by the popularity of the film, before certain criticisms, it sold well. To entice buyers, some freebies were given away – notably a free balloon and badge and, in the Computer Shop store chain, a



■ This opening level of the game was inspired by the famous sewer scenes from the movie.





■ There were loads of ghosts to contend with on the first level – here Stantz looks calm but when he gets a fright, his face sure shows it.

Ghostbusters II frisbee. And then the problem of the *ACE* review reared its head. It was a strange that it caused such a furore, given that it wasn't the only poor review. *Zzap!* gave it just 39% and called it "a hotch-potch of sub-games which fail to gel into a good game". But the niggle of the write-up in ACE appeared to rankle the most.

Activision wasn't delighted with the review; neither was Anna Ufnowska, who wrote a letter to the editor that was published the following month. In it, she accepted that reviews were opinions but she objected to the claims about there being too many disks, saying there were actually only two Amiga disks and that four were necessary for the Atari ST to cater for owners of single-sided drives. She also pulled up the mag for the zero review given for the sound. *ACE* stood by its review but revised the audio to an eight. "Since this was the one bright spark in an otherwise gloomy review, it's doubly sad that we should have slipped up," it corrected.

The shots fired seemed to ignore the CPC and Spectrum versions, though. Although the three short levels were mentioned over and over, Amstrad Action gave *Ghostbusters II* a whopping 94 per cent and *Crash* handed it a respectable 74%. The cassette versions were hauled over the coals for being multiload games – it meant reloading the game over and over which, as anyone who has experienced such a thing will tell you, was a major pain. But in the longer-term – notably when it was given a budget £2.99 re-release on the Hit Squad label – it began to get the positive attention it deserved as more and more fans were gradually drawn to the game. "We thought the game captured the key scenes from the film really well and utilised the theme of the energy in the slime perfectly," Oliver concludes. So, it wasn't a game changing licensed release, but it was definitely a strong example of the genre.

RETRO

INTERVIEW

STEWART COPELAND

Former drummer of The Police finally speaks about his time on the Spyro series, working with Insomniac Games, and if the purple dragon should get back to its classic roots

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY

Spyro The Dragon (1998) Composer

Spyro 2: Gateway To Glimmer (1999) Composer

Spyro: Year Of The Dragon (2000) Composer

What does *Spyro The Dragon* mean to you?

When I was doing *Spyro* it was during the 'Golden Age' of my family life. It was a time where my boys were old enough, and my girls were just young enough where we could all sit around the TV and play games. It was like a 1950s family, gathered around the one TV with only three stations to choose from.

My son Patrick who, by the way, works at Insomniac Games now, would take the controller and guide us through the levels. He was much better at the game than me by a long shot! *Spyro* was a real lucky strike, I think. The graphics were impressive, the gameplay was engaging and the best part for me was that I got to do it all while listening to my own damn music!

Would you consider yourself a gamer?

No, not really. I enjoyed *Spyro* with my family, but even now my son Patrick strenuously tries to engage me with games. He wants to play games in which he can not only kill his father, but also "teabag" him…

When you were starting work on *Spyro*, what did you get to see of the game itself?

I had the game in front of me and it was glorious. It took me a while to get through the levels because I was so crap at it. So because I could play it, I'd have the music I created on a loop while I played the levels. But sometimes I'd find myself forgetting about the music entirely while trying to finish the level! It was an early version of the game so it had glitches, of course. I could fly right out of the world and off into space, come around and view the level from behind. It ended up looking like a movie set. I also had cheats to help me through the game such as invincibility, which was critical to actually helping me experience the game! By the way, all the careful work I did in matching certain tracks to particular levels went unused. I'm not sure if they were just unaware that I matched levels with tracks, or that they just made different creative choices, but the result seemed kind of random to me.

EVERYTHING FROM STADIUM ROCK, CLASSICAL MUSIC, TO NURSERY THYMES I LEARNED AT SCHOOL, IT ALL WENT INTO CREATING THE MUSIC

Each *Spyro* game contains a large number of tracks. How did you deal with creating such an extensive tracklist?

Something interesting came from working on Spyro, and other times where I had to create a large volume of material fast, such

ALONE IN THE DARK: THE NEW NIGHTMARE

■■■ Outside of the *Spyro* series, Stewart also worked on the *Alone In The Dark* series, namely the 2001's, *The New Nightmare*. Though the game's subject matter is quite unlike anything he ever tackled before throughout his career, his contribution to the game falls very much is line with his past work. Alongside Jimmie Wood, Stewart created the theme song *Alone In The Dark*, an over-the-top rock anthem that contains excellent vocals, heavy drums from Stewart and a big hook that leads into the belting chorus.

as when I composed for *Dead Like Me* and *The Equalizer*. For TV, the show comes in Tuesday and you have to finish the music and ship it by Friday, whether it's your finest hour or not. For *Spyro* it was kind of like doing a quadruple LP of backing tracks. A lot of material was required, and under that intense schedule the quality of work improved drastically. That's not what you'd expect and it sounds counter-intuitive, but the music I've done in a blazing hurry is the best music I've ever written. When I get commissioned by the Pittsburgh Symphony to write a concerto for their orchestra, I reach back to *Spyro* for some of those tunes I wrote in the heat of the moment. They're some of my most affecting music, my best insights and my best ideas.

It's in these moments of pressure is when our creative juices start to flow. I arrived at my *Spyro* music very quickly. I'd write four tunes in a day and on the next day I'd tidy them up. And yet, under those conditions the actual depth of the music and the progressions, makes for some of my favourite music that I've ever written.

When composing for games, do you bring across what you've learned from your other work, or do you start from scratch?

I bring everything across. Whether you're writing a song for a band, scoring a scene in a movie or writing a theme for a level in a game, it's the band, the scene or the game that points your creativity in the right direction. But it's your life that expresses itself once you're pointed in the right direction. So for Spyro, everything from stadium rock, classical music to nursery thymes I learned at school all went into creating the music for any given level.

How do you approach creating tracks that gamers won't tire of?

Many tracks intentionally overlap, including the main *Spyro* theme. I would apply them in other levels with no problem, because I thought that cross pollination would be good, and a recognizable tune coming back during the game was all part of *Spyro*'s world. Each track would be about three minutes, and if I wasn't sick of it after listening to it again and again, it would be okay. You could also apply some rules of thumb to it as well, such as don't user annoying sounds. Even if they sound cool at first, they might get old fast. Ultimately, you need to rely on your own instincts to know if it's crap or not. That goes for any art. In fact, under pressure you often don't have time to work out if it's crap or not. It's only years later in which you look back on your work and think, 'Hey that's not bad!'

With Spyro being quite a young dragon, he is only able to glide rather than fly. Spyro's glide is something you will use quite often though the game.

SPYRO THE DRAGON: ENTER THE DRAGONFLY

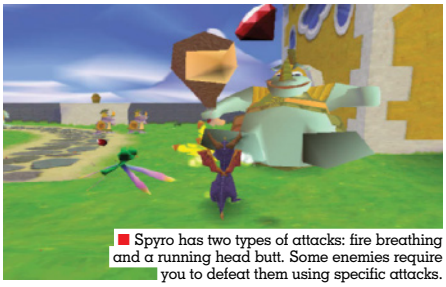
Stewart was a fixture of the Spyro series right from its inception. However, after *Spyro: Enter The Dragonfly*, Stewart didn't join Insomniac Games when it started the *Ratchet & Clank* franchise on the Playstation 2. Without Insomniac Games at the helm and the world lacking Stewart's music, many hardcore Spyro fans felt that every game since *Enter The Dragonfly* was missing something special.

During your work on Spyro, how did you feel your music complemented the setting of the levels?

Well, let's say it's a ice level. That's easy because in my palette I had certain sounds that sounded icy. They were mostly metallic sounds. But if you were going for a jungle level you'd change the palette slightly to something that would help tell that story.

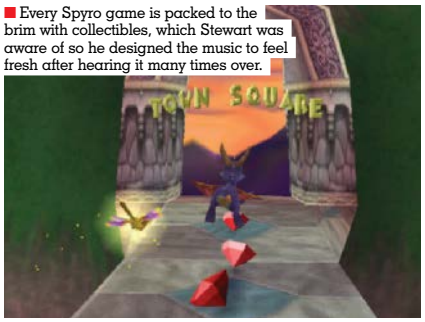
Your final Spyro game was *Enter The Dragonfly* on Playstation 2. Compared to the first game, how much did the tech change?

The gear is evolving all the time, and there have been whole technologies since I started recording back in 1974. There are always emergences of technology that change everything, flourish for awhile, then are gone. An example of that is the Mitsubishi 48-track digital multi-recorder. I'm not sure where exactly the technology changed between the first three *Spyro* games to *Enter The Dragonfly* in terms of music, but the game itself underwent a massive change in technology. It was a different development team who worked on it too, so it never felt quite the same to me. Maybe that's why it was the last one I did.



Spyro has two types of attacks: fire breathing and a running head butt. Some enemies require you to defeat them using specific attacks.

Level design throughout the Spyro series is incredibly colourful and diverse, and this is reflected throughout Stewart's music.



Every Spyro game is packed to the brim with collectibles, which Stewart was aware of so he designed the music to feel fresh after hearing it many times over.

Spyro's cast is both recognisable and iconic. This is mostly thanks to Charles Zembillas, art director on both *Spyro The Dragon* and *Year Of The Dragon*.

Was there a certain moment for you that you can recall that cemented your end with the series?

I remember the team came in to create the promotional materials for *Enter The Dragonfly*. They showed me an ad they had, which I didn't even recognise as Spyro. It was country and western-themed, and I think that's where the divergence happened for me. We were not on the same page any more. I enjoyed working on all the Spyro games that I was involved with, but I think it ended at a logical place.

Do you think that era of Spyro can be ever be returned to?

Here's a good analogy. The band Genesis had a whole career and then Peter Gabriel, their lead singer, left and started his own solo career. The band thought "Screw that!" and then the drummer, Phil Collins, moved onto the mic and they have a whole new string of hits. All the diehard Genesis fans regard the original line-up as the best version of the band, much like how many Spyro fans feel about the first three or four games. Anyway, years later they tried to get the original Genesis line-up back together for a big reunion tour. Peter Gabriel took some time to think about it – because he's like that – and while he thought it over they did some market research. It turns out that no one wanted to go see the original line-up because all the hits they remember were from the Phil Collins years. There's a whole generation of gamers for which the new Spyro is the real deal.

GAMES CAN NOW END UP SOUNDING LIKE THE BIGGEST MOVIE YOU'VE EVER SEEN

What was it like working with Insomniac Games during your time on the series?

Like any client, they were all over me at the beginning to get the tone right, while the first few tracks were judged by a committee and it went back and forth, leading to debates and discussions. Then gradually they left me alone. So after the first few meetings with Insomniac Games I saw very little of them.

Stewarts work on *Alone in the Dark: The New Nightmare*, though vastly overlooked, is well worth a listen.

Do you think you'd ever return to games?

It depends on the game. Games are really big time now. I did the original *Spyro* on a small budget on two samplers, and now they do it with full orchestras and it's a huge symphonic score with massive resources thrown at the music. Games can now end up sounding like the biggest movie you've ever seen. I wouldn't enjoy that as much, because all of that orchestration is really hard work, and that's my day job right now. A game I would say yes to would be one that had music on the same level as Spyro, where it's just cheap and cheerful, where you bang them out and you get on a roll and it's got a groove, atmosphere and a vibe that doesn't require a big orchestra. That's the kind of thing I would get into.

Do you think that simplified music can still be as effective as big budget soundtracks?

Absolutely. I see it like live-action film vs animation. When you simplify the image, it has a different kind of impact. When you distil the image and place limitations on it, it ends up having more power. This is the same for all art.

What was your favourite film that you composed for?

My most well-known is *Wall Street*, but my favourite is called *Very Bad Things* from 1998. It contains less music than I wrote for it, but I could watch it again and again. It's the blackest of black comedies. Check it out!

Do you still hear from Spyro fans?

Yeah, on Facebook there is a lot of traffic about Spyro, almost to the same level of traffic that is interested in The Police. Whenever I post something on Facebook a percentage of fans will ask when The Police are going to tour again, a percentage of them ask when Oysterhead is going to return, while a percentage tell me how much they loved *Spyro*.

Following the huge success of *Grand Theft Auto III*, DMA Designs rebranded to Rockstar North, which would go on to continue reinventing the sandbox space with the likes of *Vice City* and *GTA V*.

GAME CHANGERS

GRAND THEFT AUTO III

Released: DMA Designs **Publisher:** Rockstar Games **Developer:** 22 October 2001 **System:** PS2

In 2001 a state of emergency was declared as one sprawling sandbox defied all belief and changed gaming forever

22 OCTOBER WAS the day Rockstar unleashed its reinvention of the modern videogame, establishing the template that all open-world sandbox games would use in the decade that followed. *Grand Theft Auto III* wasn't just a staggering technical achievement, but one of the most important releases of the sixth-generation; a testament to DMA's vision of letting players loose in a world of virtualised crime and corruption.

We were handed the keys to a living metropolis, thrown into seedy Liberty City, and then were free to do as we pleased. *GTA III* was for the gamer who was sick of saving the princess from yet another castle; it was a reaction to the stale action genre and the bland shooters that presided over the early PlayStation 2 era. *GTA III* was for the sophisticated player who didn't mind getting their hands a little dirty from time to time.

And dirty you would have to get them. If you weren't there the first time round, it's probably difficult to imagine what the reaction to *GTA III* was even like. Gamers were astounded by the freedom, the scope and depth; left wildly impressed by the sheer breadth of options thrust into their sweaty palms. Everybody else in the world was horrified, distraught that a "murder simulator" had been allowed to infect society and corrupt the youth. "Won't somebody please think of the children?" news outlets, government officials, retailers and concerned citizens would cry –

BEST WEAPONS

THE QUICKEST WAYS TO CAUSE CHAOS

ROCKET LAUNCHER

★ While ammo is often difficult to find, the rocket launcher is the best tool in the game for the ultimate amount of carnage. If you're battling against a big police presence, the rocket launcher is the key to survival – though you need to be wary of splash damage.

BASEBALL BAT

★ Who would have thought a piece of wood could cause so much harm? The baseball bat is one of the earliest weapons you find in Liberty City, but its uses are nearly endless. Work dents out of your car and defend yourself against the mob.

MOLOTOV COCKTAIL

★ It might take a little time to find, but the Molotov cocktails can cause widespread damage very quickly. Best used as a method for crowd control, but there's also a lot of satisfaction to be had in nailing passing vehicles from bridges and rooftops.

blissfully unaware that every generated controversy would only go on to establish GTA III's infamy and sales, which now sits beyond 17 million sold. If you were under 18 in 2001, there was no greater task – no mission more important – than convincing your parents to purchase GTA III on your behalf, lest you wanted to become the pariah of the playground.

■■■ "Well, sure, you *can* kill prostitutes," teenagers would be heard reasoning the world over, "but you don't *have* to." And it's true, *GTA III* might hand you a loaded gun, but it never forced you to pull the trigger. For the first time, we were lost in a bustling open-world city, rendered in gorgeous, moody 3D. Pedestrians went on with their business, vehicles jostled for street space and everything seemed to move around you, not with you. All of this potential, and there we were stood on the hood of a car pumping round after round into anything that moved like a crazed lunatic, quoting lines from *Heat* and *The Sopranos* as we did it. Were we exorcising our demons? Perhaps, though it's far more likely that we were just taken aback by the open-ended game design.

At a technical level, *GTA III* was peerless back in 2001. The level of detail was phenomenal, the size of the open world was staggering. The AI was sophisticated – for years it would find new ways to surprise and entertain – while

AT A TECHNICAL LEVEL, GTA III WAS PEERLESS BACK IN 2001

KEY FACTS

■ The reason the Shoreside Vale tunnel was always closed? It's not because Rockstar didn't finish it in time, but because the studio wanted to give the impression that the world continued beyond the game's borders.

■ Because of the September 11 tragedy, Rockstar did some emergency clean up on *GTA III*, removing or changing 1% of the content that shipped due to concerns over how it would be perceived following the terror attacks.

the tight third-person camera gave us a new perspective on action we had enjoyed since 1997 (with the release of the original top-down *GTA*). Not to mention, the controls and shooting mechanics were a genuine revolution. It was an excellently complementary system. But *GTA III* was always more than its systems and mechanics; perhaps that's why people gravitated towards it so passionately.

The mature story felt fresh and violently invigorating, a thinly-veiled ode to the collected works of Martin Scorsese. The soundtrack was diverse and the radio waves full of personality, letting us drown out the sounds of sirens with the thunderous howls found on MSX FM or the inane chatter from Lazlow's Chatterbox FM. There were an unprecedented amount of side-missions and 'hidden packages' to discover, mini-games to enjoy and free-play opportunities to revel in.

There's a reason *GTA III* set the template for sandbox design in the years that followed, and not because it was absurdly successful – so is *FIFA* every year – but for its staggering innovation. From the way in which we were able to interact with the world, the pace of that sprawling and cinematic story to the sheer breadth of options it gave you to cause chaos in a digital space, *GTA III* changed gaming in a way that is difficult to comprehend.

GAME CHANGERS

EIGHT WAYS GTA III CHANGED THE GAME

SANDBOX SHOOTERS AND ACTION GAMES WERE NEVER THE SAME AGAIN – HERE'S WHAT DMA DESIGN BROUGHT TO THE GENRE

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

Grand Theft Auto III might not have been the first game to feature Liberty City – that honour goes to the original release back in 1997 – but its appearance here was unlike anything seen in gaming before. We had seen open worlds before, but usually in the realms of fantasy, never had we explored something so busy and bustling with life.

STONE-FACED KILLER

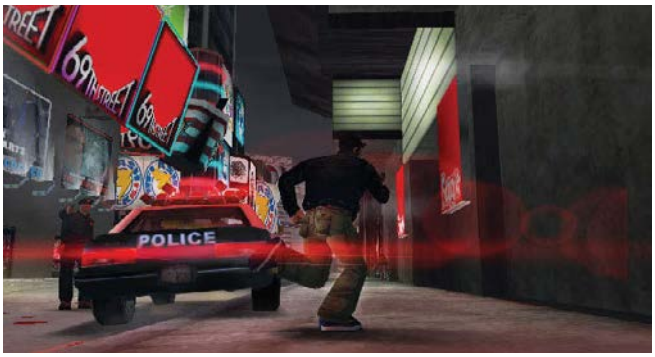
The idea of a silent protagonist certainly isn't new, but Rockstar did a fantastic job with its characterisation of Claude, the voiceless *Grand Theft Auto III* protagonist. With just cutscenes and radio interviews, Claude became one of the most successful *GTA* characters, letting players fill in the blanks to his role in this seedy slice of American injustice.

NEED FOR SPEED

■ At its heart, *Grand Theft Auto III* could often feel like the ultimate street racing game. Whilst its 2D forefathers would always feature chaotic driving, it was nothing compared to tearing through a fully 3D city. The freedom to get in any car at any time and just *drive* was liberating, as was the knowledge that you could take down anybody in your way.

IN CONTROL

■ It might handle like hell now days, but back in 2001 we hadn't seen such controls in a third-person action game. The shooting and movement mechanics were polished beyond belief; it could be played and enjoyed for hours on end. Rockstar would continue to refine its controls over the years, but their debut here in *GTA III* was special.



INNOVATIVE DESIGN

■ Because of the open-play possibilities, the main storyline in the early *GTA* games often gets overlooked, though it was pretty incredible. DMA Design packed *Grand Theft Auto III* with clever missions that really utilised the space: who could ever forget the Salvatore Leone rooftop assassination or the helicopter/rocket launcher showdown?

GUNS, GUNS, GUNS

■ The range of weaponry available to the player in GTA III was vast. There was a weapon for every occasion, be it a baseball bat for terrorising pedestrians or items such as molotov cocktails and rocket launchers for those times you need to see off a five-star Wanted level. If you needed/wanted full destruction, *GTA* always had your back.

CINEMATIC FLAIR

■ Hot on the heels of the Rockstar-published *Max Payne*, *GTA III* fuelled the publisher's fascination with bringing cinematic flair to games. The way the story was framed around crime fiction was brilliant, as was the use of voice talent. Michael Rapaport, Joe Pantoliano, Michael Madsen and Robert Loggia all had parts in the game.

FREE TO ROAM

■ *Grand Theft Auto* never forces you to commit crimes whilst outside of its story missions, but it sure doesn't stop you either. There was a primal joy to be found in going off the rails in *GTA*, stocking up on weapons before seeing how long you could survive with the entire city (and the army) after you. *GTA III* was the first time we felt truly free in a videogame.

TOYS | PERIPHERALS | APPAREL | GADGETS | BOOKS

THE VAULT

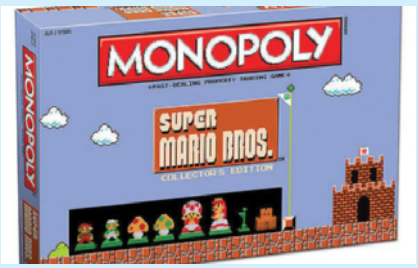
VIEWSONIC VX2457-MHD

MANUFACTURER: **VIEWSONIC** PRICE: **£139.99**

THE GAMING-FOCUSED monitor market is getting pretty competitive, which has good and bad elements to it. On the negative side, it means you have to wade through a lot of rubbish to find a really decent screen for your PC or console setup. On the positive side it means you can get a pretty high-spec, reasonably-sized monitor like this one for not too much money. This ViewSonic model is 25 inches and offers great picture quality, a nice look, and some smart design features.

For a start it supports AMD FreeSync, which means that if you use certain AMD graphics cards in your PC setup you can experience a tear-free picture at up to 75hz, even on really fast games. It basically means a minimal amount of distortion and latency to the image and when you're playing PC games and you care about every frame that could get dropped, that's pretty important. This is complemented by a super clear and crisp picture quality with the full HD, 1080p display. The black levels and white point are excellent, leading to deep dark colours and crisp, clear whites. Combined with the matt finish on the screen itself, colours really pop nicely on this monitor with no reflection to interfere with your view.

Some elements of the build quality of the monitor might though. The stand for instance offers limited adjustable angles on top of being a little lightweight. The screen can be jostled fairly easily, although it never looks likely to topple over. The overall design though is pretty good. The bezels are thin and are also matt, so they don't distract the eye. The power light on the bottom is a nice stylistic touch too. The buttons for controlling monitor options are a little awkward to reach on the back of the device. Overall though, for the price point, this is a very good screen, perfectly sized for a bedroom or PC setup on a budget.



SUPER MARIO BROS MONOPOLY

Hard to believe that this wasn't one of the first videogame-inspired Monopoly spin-offs to be released, but there you are. Some nice 8-bit character designs and smart use of locations makes this a winner.

www.thinkgeek.com

UNCHARTED DRAKE'S WATCH

One for all budding adventurers, especially if you tend to get an odd skin reaction from having metal on your wrist. Ever noticed that? Well, the cuff on this watch will solve that beautifully.

www.thinkgeek.com

GAME BOY BI-FOLD WALLET

This smart wallet is a wonderfully embossed tribute to Nintendo's original Game Boy. The colouring, features and spacing are all impressively accurate and the build quality looks to be top notch.

www.funstock.co.uk

GAMING CLOTHING

WOW ALLIANCE SHIRT

With Legion closing in it seems like the right time to show your allegiances proudly and clearly with a cool baseball tee like this one. It's also available in a Horde variation should you be so inclined.

www.thinkgeek.com

MASS EFFECT TINY SEASHELLS TEE

This was a winning fan design for a recent WeLoveFine *Mass Effect* contest and we can see why. We thought Mordin was pretty cute already, but this image turns that up a few more notches.

www.thinkgeek.com

OVERWATCH FOR THE GOOD TEE

Tracer and Winston team up for this smartly designed tribute to Blizzard's popular FPS. If you can drag yourself away from your console long enough to be seen wearing this one, we imagine others will be impressed.

www.thinkgeek.com

SUPER MARIO BROS/ TIE-DYE

SOLD BY: **VANS** PRICE: **£52**

FOR THOSE WHO think Mario's interest in mushrooms might be a hint that *Super Mario Bros.* is all some kind of drug-induced dream, these tie-dye Vans seem to be the perfect trainers.

www.vans.co.uk

CONTROLLER/TRUE WHITE

SOLD BY: **VANS** PRICE: **£60**

JUST IN CASE all these low-slung trainers aren't your thing there's also these hi-tops you can check out with the original NES controller all over them. Another crazy design, but pretty cool.

www.vans.co.uk

PRINCESS PEACH

SOLD BY: **VANS** PRICE: **£52**

PEACH GETS HER own full range of Vans clothing and accessories along with these trainers. We kind of prefer the kids' design though, which features Peach in her *Mario Kart* biker incarnation.

www.vans.co.uk

ZELDA/PARISIAN NIGHT

SOLD BY: **VANS** PRICE: **£52**

THESE ZELDA SHOES are one of our favourite designs from the new Vans range, having some of that kitschy geometric charm of a winter jumper. Perfect for the adventurer who likes to lounge around.

www.vans.co.uk

ZELDA/BLACK

SOLD BY: **VANS** PRICE: **£55**

TURNING THE MOST famous moment from the original *Legend Of Zelda* into a shoe design, these trainers cost a little more than the others, but that's because they're made from leather rather than canvas.

www.vans.co.uk

DONKEY KONG/BLACK

SOLD BY: **VANS** PRICE: **£52**

DONKEY KONG GETS his own snazzy design from Vans, which can also be found on a rather garish shirt if you want to go in that direction. Having these on your feet should attract enough attention.

www.vans.co.uk

DUCK HUNT/CAMO

SOLD BY: **VANS** PRICE: **£52**

THE PERFECT TRAINERS for those of you who like their ducks digital and their hunting dogs to be laughing, these camo Vans are pretty smart and not quite as crazy looking as some other designs.

www.vans.co.uk

CONSOLE/DOVE

SOLD BY: **VANS** PRICE: **£55**

OUR FAVOURITE DESIGN of the Vans series, in no small part to the fact that the design is the most subtle. These shoes pay tribute to the NES with a nice pixelised version of the classic Vans stripe.

www.vans.co.uk

SUPER FAMICOM: THE BOX ART COLLECTION BOOK

PUBLISHER: **BITMAP BOOKS**

IF YOU THOUGHT the games on the Super Famicom were cool on the screen, you won't believe how good some of the boxart was for the Japanese console. The box designs in the East were often varied wildly from those released on the SNES in the West, not least because the box dimensions themselves were actually different.

This collection is 250 pages and features fantastic photography of some of the very best Famicom boxart from the Nineties. It's all printed beautifully on great quality paper with Lithographic print for the sharpest possible colours. There are around 250 titles in the book too, ranging from the well-known to the more obscure. And thanks to the dimensions of the book, every box is presented in its life-size form, which is a nice little touch.

It's good to see that every inch of the book is being put to good use too as the square format allows some room for editorial along with the art. There are interviews with enthusiasts, collectors and critiques of the art itself, all nicely laid out.

It doesn't feature games you might want to see in such a collection, but the curation and presentation are of the highest standard and it makes a fine addition to any collection of gaming titles on your coffee table.

www.funstock.co.uk

VERDICT 9/10

XCOM 2 RESURRECTION

This is the official novelisation of the *XCOM 2* game, detailing the alien invasion that forced the powers of the world to unite and then ultimately surrender. *XCOM* is now a paramilitary organisation in this reality as the last resistance fighters try to reclaim control of the planet.

www.forbiddenplanet.com

LARA CROFT & THE BLADE OF GWYNNEVER

While Square Enix continues to explore a brand new set of *Tomb Raider* adventures on consoles, the classic Lara Croft continues in a parallel universe under the her own banner. This tale mixes history and fiction as Croft tries to find some legendary artefacts and prevent a disaster.

www.forbiddenplanet.com

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT: TWILIGHT COMPANY

This book based on the latest DICE *Star Wars* shooter takes a grunt-level view of the galactic conflict between the Empire and Resistance. A squad of ordinary soldiers is in the trenches and all that matters to them is loyalty, and surviving the battles ahead.

www.forbiddenplanet.com

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